Help Students with Rigorous Writing Assignments

Many faculty who assign writing face this dilemma: we want our writing assignments to be rigorous, but we know that most students will struggle with them. Students must be able to write clearly and demonstrate learning and critical thinking, and we want to help them without lowering our standards. Here are some strategies for doing just that.

✓ **Clarify your grading criteria for writing assignments with explicit outcomes and/or rubrics.** Give students your grading criteria/rubric *before* they begin work on the assignment. Students must know exactly what an assignment asks them to *do* as well as how your grading will reflect how well they *did* it. Many faculty think in terms of *ideas* or concepts; most students tend to think in terms of the *tasks* they’re asked to *do*. If “outcomes” and “rubrics” sound too confining for your discipline or teaching style, search the internet for approaches to writing and assessing “expressive outcomes.”

✓ **Avoid unstated or assumed grading standards or criteria.** If you have high grammar standards, communicate them clearly to students in terms of how grammar will impact their grades. If your assignment includes a critical thinking component, describe the required critical thinking task(s) and your standards for evaluating them. Don’t surprise them with standards and expectations *after* they have submitted an assignment.

✓ **Require students to grade their own assignment or project… in writing.** Give students your grading rubric in advance. Require them to submit with the assignment a projected grade along with a *written* rationale that uses the rubric to justify the projected grade. Once you grade the assignment, discuss the differences between your assessment and theirs using the rubric. This focuses feedback on areas where students may not perceive their own struggles. Use examples (see tip below) that correlate with the high levels of competency on the rubric as a comparison.
✓ **Show students examples of good student work on writing assignments.** You have a context for evaluating student work. Students do not. Showing them examples of good work on rigorous assignments and breaking those examples down into their successful components or attributes shows students what you are expecting.

✓ **Give second chances on writing assignments.** Allowing students to revise and resubmit a writing assignment doesn’t mean “going easy” on them; it means giving them additional chances to learn. You can also require students to meet with a college tutor or visit an academic skills center before they resubmit an assessment. Students have more incentive to work hard when they know the grade they will earn if they do not improve. Require students who resubmit an assignment to include with it a one page “revision summary” that describes, in detail, the changes they made in this revised version of the assignment.

✓ **Try doing your own writing assignment.** Pay close attention to your exact assignment language and draw only from the material you have covered up to that point in class. When you do this, you put yourself in your students’ shoes and discover things you might be taking for granted about your own assignment. You might also discover any presumptions about what your students know or can already do that are implicit in your assignment.

✓ **Break down or scaffold the higher-order thinking skills of a writing assignment into their component parts or prerequisite tasks.** If you are assigning a paper, what are the five big things that students must be able to do as writers (or readers) in order to successfully write the paper? Ask them to do practice or demonstrate each of those things in small assignments that receive your feedback before they write the paper. If you want students to develop an original argument or analyze a problem or case study, what must they be able to do first, second, and third in order to “analyze”? (See Top 10 #20 and #24)

✓ **Model your own writing process for students.** When you share with students your own strategies for generating and organizing ideas, you are foster their metacognitive skills. When you share the things you struggled with as a student, you acknowledge that learning is difficult and reinforce students’ self-efficacy. Show them how you read, study, and write. (See Top 10 #18 and #22).

✓ **Be consistent with your feedback.** Aside from not getting graded work back in a timely manner, nothing confuses and frustrates students more
than inconsistent, contradictory, or vague feedback. If X means 10 points off, then X means 10 points off. Don’t forget praise; everyone needs it.

✔ If students regularly struggle with your writing assignments, ask them for help. You can get feedback from your students after they have read assignment instructions, after they have begun working on the assignment, and/or after they have written it. Use the last five minutes of class to ask students to write and anonymously submit to you answers to prompts such as “it helps me the most when you…,” and “it helps me least when you…,” “the thing about this assignment that most confuses(ed) me is…,” or “the part of this writing assignment that I struggle(d) with the most was…” If you discover patterns in where they are struggling, you can develop ways to clarify your assignment language, target your instruction and class activities, and rethink your assumptions. (See Top 10 #9)

A special thanks to our colleague Jon Anderson of Quinebaug Valley Community College for inspiring a few of the suggestions above!
No. 1 – The All-Important First Day of Class
No. 2 – Ways to Make Your Teaching Life Easier
No. 3 – The Crucial Second and Third Classes
No. 4 – Ways to Show Students that You Respect Them
No. 5 – Promote Effective Student Study Skills
No. 6 – Components of a Well-Planned Class
No. 7 – Observe Your Teaching Tendencies
No. 8 – Ways to Keep Your Students Learning
No. 9 – Ways to Get Feedback on Teaching from Students
No. 10 – Using Short Writing to Assess Learning
No. 11 – Getting More (and Better) Student Questions
No. 12 – Mixing Things up Mid-Semester
No. 13 – Engaging Different Input Preferences
No. 14 – Helping Students Stay the Journey
No. 15 – Ways to End Your Course
No. 16 – Resources for Learning and Teaching
No. 17 – Create a Memorable AND Functional Syllabus
No. 18 – Ways to Build Your Students’ Self-Efficacy
No. 19 – Practical Study Tips to Share with Your Students
No. 20 – Laddering Thinking Skills
No. 21 – Learning Based Ways to End Lessons
No. 22 – Ways and Reasons to be Vulnerable While Teaching
No. 23 – Best Practices in Using Student Groups
No. 24 – Components of a Complete Learning Experience
No. 25 – Ways to Use Visuals for Learning
No. 26 – Students’ Locus of Control