

## **Assignments from Hell:**

### **The View from the Writing Center**

Muriel Harris

Samuel Johnson may have originated the phrase, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” but from the perspective of a writing center tutor, the road to hellishly bad papers is often paved with well-intentioned assignments. OK, not as pithy as Johnson’s aphorism, but much student writing can and does go astray when assignments prompted by good intentions are not well constructed. As a result, students coping with such assignments often head for their campus writing center, looking for clarification, assistance in interpreting what the assignment is about, or feedback about whether their draft has met the requirements of the assignment because they aren’t sure what the assignment has asked them to do. In some cases, such students haven’t learned to read assignments. Without that ability, they aren’t likely to be able to produce college-level writing. But while some students falter with college-level writing because they can’t read the assignments critically—a topic for another day—there are other students who can’t respond appropriately to the assignment because it isn’t well constructed. In a workshop handout I developed long ago, I used to call these poor examples of assignments “AFHs”: Assignments from Hell.

Unfortunately, as someone who has spent many years tutoring in a writing center, I am not alone in realizing that tutors have to deal with far too many sadly deficient papers that are the

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outcome of weak assignments. Derek Owens describes this problem as follows: “To put it bluntly, many—and probably a great many—of the writing tasks our tutors and clients discuss are train wrecks. Too many of the assignments they work on are unimaginative, uninspiring, predictable, and ill designed—overly vague or excessively picayune” (153). Owens, a writing center director, vents a level of frustration that afflicts writing center tutors, too--and for the same reason. Many of the “train wrecks” that tutors see in writing centers are the result of poor assignments--muddy, overly long, confusing, or vague. Often, assignments can be all of these at once. In my years of sitting with students at tutoring tables, I have also heard students’ confusions, frustrations, and misunderstandings, and I have seen what hinders their ability to respond appropriately to assignments. In the belief that bad examples are good teaching tools (in the sense of seeing specific things to avoid), I offer this introduction to what can go astray with assignments as seen from my perspective as a tutor and Writing Center director.

### **Anticipating Teacher Expectations**

It's important to begin this discussion with the understanding that many students read assignment sheets and interpret them through the filter of their previous experience with English teachers--a vitally important variable in all of this that current instructors, of course, cannot control.

Although an assignment may be clear, strong, and focused, students will often shape their reading of assignments based on what they think is hiding behind the words on the assignment sheet. Even if they’ve been told what the criteria are for grading, they are prone to interpreting such information in idiosyncratic ways. Some of their misperceptions about grading arise mysteriously during their years in secondary school and carry over into college, and some don’t originate until they enter college. It’s hard to pin down exactly how such grading schema get

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embedded in students' minds, but they are there and they need to be recognized when we read student papers.

Much of this confusion comes from students' internalized beliefs about "good writing." One idea that prevails in secondary schools is the conviction that longer papers are always better. They have no doubt heard endless lunch table chatter about sets of papers being graded by tossing the pack down the steps to see which reached farthest down. The ones at the very bottom, of course, get the "A's." Thus, if there isn't some general expectation of length given in the assignment, some students who write long, rambling papers are simply adhering to the rule that "more is better." A well-intentioned teacher who doesn't want to set what she sees as arbitrary or artificial limits may inadvertently allow some students to pad, add more, or drift off into whatever else can fill more pages because such students are working on the assumption that they are enhancing their grade. When comments come back about unneeded digressions, unnecessary information, or wordiness, these students may assume some other mysterious criterion is in play.

There are other expectations that lead students astray, such as assuming that they are required to be creative or to have "fresh new ideas." Many students, in fact, are adamant that some teacher, somewhere in the past, spelled this out unequivocally as the single, lone criterion for all good writing. Students who perceive the absolute need to come up with "new ideas" struggle to be original, but their time and effort generally would be better spent elsewhere. A variation of this is the student who is making a strong connection between a text and her analysis, but looks hopelessly at the tutor and shrugs: "She's a smart instructor. She knows that already, so I can't just repeat what she knows."

Since contradictory myths can co-exist comfortably, some students have told me that the obvious lack of attention to grammatical correctness doesn't matter since in high school they

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were graded “on ideas,” not grammar. Another prevalent myth is not that “ideas,” creativity, or length matters, but that grammatical correctness is the predominant standard by which papers are judged. A paper might be poorly organized and in need of significant clarification and development, but if all the commas are there in the right places, the student “knows” it will get a good grade. This will be where that student expends the most effort. A superb example of this was a student who once appeared at a tutorial and showed me a draft that had a long succession of short, clipped sentences, arranged staccato fashion on the page. I assumed we’d want to talk about sentence variety, but the student had no interest in that topic. Finally, after much discussion, he explained that because he feared comma mistakes (a deadly sin instilled somewhere in his past), he kept his sentences short.

Most often the unspoken assumption about the importance of grammar among some students derives from dreading that the teacher will slash and burn her way through the paper, wielding a red pencil as she hunts for any possible error (sometimes graphically described as “she bled all over my paper”). Tutors know how pervasive the fear of grammatical mistakes is and have to struggle with students who come in a half-hour before the paper is due because they want it proofread, thereby insuring a decent grade. Such students are not anxious to know how the tutor reads and interprets the paper or to listen to discussions that will lead to insights into how to develop ideas. Despite some instructors’ grading sheets that indicate that grammatical correctness will count only 5% or 10%, such students continue to seek out the writing center to be sure there are no misspellings, no punctuation mistakes, and heaven forbid, a fragment (shudder!). Any conversation the tutor tries to initiate about clarity, organization, or some other obvious problem with the paper is unimportant for such students. They KNOW what counts.

Attempting to debunk these myths and misperceptions with a class can provoke an interesting

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discussion and help to disperse the unspoken notions about writing that often inhibit student growth and learning. Teachers can mitigate these mistaken perceptions that can flaw papers by providing students with a clear and succinct grading criteria, and then discussing it with them in some detail. When an instructor works intensively to clarify what actually does determine the grading process, more students will respond to those criteria instead of what they think the hidden criteria are.

### **Clarifying Those Standards**

Although teachers do attempt to indicate criteria for how papers will be graded, generalities, abstractions, and ambiguous word choices often weaken communication between students and teachers. It is also very confusing if there is no indication regarding which parts of a grading rubric are more important than others. In this case, students are given no guidance as to where best to expend their energies. Consider the following example (slightly altered in topic from the original but not in the rest of the wording):

*Analyze the problem of gender in Hedda Gabler and Uncle Tom's Cabin. Remember to consider other relevant factors such as race, social conditions, economic class, and author's nationality. I expect clean, tightly written, interesting prose that is free of literary jargon. If your thinking is sloppy, the paper will be sloppy, and I grade accordingly.*

In the instructor's mind, the student's "thinking" is important, so the main point of the paper has to be something that is not "sloppy" and is "cleanly written." But what's "clean" writing or "sloppy" thinking? What does the student focus on for the topic? What is the instructor's hierarchy for what is more important than some other element in the assignment? The

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assignment stresses gender initially, but there is that added note about “other relevant factors.” So the point to be made must be in the context of all those other concerns? Will a student be able to craft a topic sentence or introductory paragraph that’s unified if the instructor expects all of these factors as part of a “tightly written” essay? Or does “tightly written” possibly mean that critical thinking will tie it all together? Or that the paper will develop its points briefly and cogently? Since there’s no word limit, how long would a “tightly written” paper be? And given the known variety of human taste as to what constitutes “interesting prose,” what would that mean? What makes prose interesting? Any group of instructors could have a serious two- to three-hour discussion that might lead to a definition or a consensus of opinions.

Delineating criteria is so complex that a number of other problems can creep in when we indicate how papers will be graded. When the various aspects of a paper are determined numerically (e.g., 20% of the grade will be determined by how thoroughly the topic is researched), students whose goal is simply to get through a course are likely to browse through the numerical level of various criteria and focus on what will get them the most points. Sadly, a teacher who has emphasized researching, for example, may not want correct formatting of the bibliography to consume the student too much, so that may be rated as merely 10% of a grade. But the unspoken assumption in the teacher’s mind is that she wants her students to learn how to document sources. The lackluster student may choose to ignore the requirements of a “Works Cited” because it’s not worth it to him. Tutors often try to talk to students about how they might revise some aspect of a paper only to hear students say that in terms of grading, whatever the tutor had suggested they work on is not important. Such students don’t see the need to labor over all aspects of a piece of writing. They don’t feel the need to craft a well-written document. They simply go for the points that count the most (especially if they’ve procrastinated in getting the

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assigned paper done and a chemistry test is looming on the horizon). Setting up criteria that are weighted in importance is clearly a way to help students see what truly is important and what is being stressed in any particular assignment, but they need to hear that the whole set of criteria are important and that even something that will only count for 5% or 15% is important too. A paper is a composite of many writing abilities, and it helps to explain that they all must work together to form the satisfactory paper.

Students care about their grades, and giving them understandable, concrete criteria, as complete as possible within reasonable limits, can result in papers more consciously aimed at the effective, clear, literate prose we are trying to help them learn to write.

### **Stressing Form over Substance**

There are yet other aspects of grading standards for assignments that can cause problems. Kim Ballard, the writing center director at Western Michigan University, reminds us how over-emphasis on formatting can consume too much of students' energies and writing time:

I've noticed that instructors who struggle with assignments tend to write assignments based on how they want a document to look—which is crucial to them—not on (a) the writing goals the task is supposed to help students grapple with or learn or (b) the way the task fits into a particular discipline.

For example, the assignment will be full of details about margins, fonts, and length. The teachers may have a full chart of the types of mechanical errors they don't want to see in the paper. Yet the assignment may say little about how the writing task supports

(a) the goals of the course

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- (b) the abilities the assignment is intended to help students learn
- c) the history of "errors" or "poor writing" that the teacher has experienced and has written his/her assignments against.

Certainly it helps to clarify format if that is among a teacher's goals. And visual literacy makes format important. But again, there is a need to clarify the hierarchy of which criteria is more important than other criteria. Too many details about how a paper should look broadcasts by the sheer percentage of instructions on the page that this is what really counts. This is evident in the following example from a high school world history class that had been studying the Incas:

Answer the following essay question using the documents provided in class as the main source of evidence.

*Question:* What happened at Cajamarca?

*Format:* Essays must have such things as double-spaced, 1" margins, 10 pt. font, name in left corner and class period in right corner of first line, title on second line, no longer than two pages, stapled in upper left corner.

*Language:* Essays are to be written in formal English observing the stylistic conventions outlined in Strunk, William Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*. The Library and Writing Center should have copies. Formal written English is serious in tone; frivolity is out of place. Pay particular attention to the following:

- a. History is always written in the active voice and past tense.
- b. Slang is not appropriate.
- c. Avoid personal pronouns.
- d. Use quotation marks only around the actual words in sources and not as a means of emphasis.

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- e. Do not use parenthesis in a short paper.
- f. Numbers under 100 must be spelled out.
- g. The first time a person is named in a paper the full name must be used; subsequently his last name should be used.

### **Running Off in All Directions**

Sometimes, instructors with excellent intentions don't stop when writing an assignment by stating the focus in terms of the purpose, audience, topic, and so on. They also want to offer students questions to think about and heuristic prompts to help develop the paper. All those questions and suggestions for directions to go in can congeal in students' minds into a multi-headed hydra pointing in six different directions. Such overloaded assignments wind up confusing students who don't know what to focus on. Here, for example, is such an assignment (as elsewhere, this is a slightly altered version):

I want you to reflect on the exhibit by [the photographer], in the exhibit on brutality in Tibet. Please visit the URLs below to find out more about the photos and photographer [two Web sites are provided]. Then, visit the following Web sites that focus on other atrocities [two more Web sites are listed].

Do a search on your own to find out, and look at photos that describe other attempts at suppressing the local population. Think about the other countries we discussed in class. Then, you are to write a short paper on your thoughts on [the photographer's] exhibit knowing what you now do. Why did you like or did not like the exhibit? What did you think of the mixture of color and black and white images? The sizes? Why do you think the United States did absolutely nothing to stop the brutality

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when they knew exactly what was happening, when we rush to other country's aid for lesser problems?? Why do you think that these things STILL continue throughout the world?

Your report is to be SINGLE SPACED, with no bigger than 10 pt. type!!!

If that instructor wanted a well-defined topic, would a writer focus on the visual aspects of the exhibit? the global situation in relation to what is pictured there? the American response to that country's plight? the human condition that causes people to commit such brutality? the likelihood that humans are prone to brutality towards each other?

In her article about assignments, Irene Clark discusses a classic example of an assignment from a first-year college writing course that also illustrates the trait of charging off in all directions at once. Clark offers the following example of such an assignment:

In the popular television show *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, what do the writers and producers wish to suggest about society? Do the different races of aliens have analogous groups in our contemporary society? What image does the show provide of law enforcement? Of racial tendencies? Of moral leadership? What ethical message does the show give its viewers?

Clark then goes on to explain the problems with such an assignment and the various student interpretations of it:

This assignment prompt is likely to be confusing to students because it contains too many questions. Unaware that one of the generic requirements implicit in many college writing assignments is to construct a thoughtful position on a problematic issue, novice students are likely to answer all the questions without connecting them, resulting in a disjointed and undeveloped essay that lacks focus and unity. Some, aware that a writing assignment

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constitutes a type of “test,” might even retell the plot of various episodes of the show, as a means of demonstrating knowledge, a phenomenon that is particularly characteristic of responses to assignments concerned with literature or film. In contrast, more knowledgeable students would be able to read through the poorly defined assignment—or at least be able to ask pertinent questions about its goals. These students would realize that it is really the first question that the essay must respond to, and that the subsequent questions were designed to prompt the development of content.

Put succinctly, Jeanne Simpson offers the following advice: “Don’t blather on and on. Write a set of good instructions, just like instructions for assembling a bicycle, because that’s what the rhetorical task really is.” Clarity, brevity, and specificity are goals to keep in mind when composing that most difficult of writing tasks—writing a good assignment.

### **Assuming Student Knowledge**

We know and acknowledge the diversity of our students’ backgrounds, linguistic abilities, cultural knowledge, and other differences among our students. But sometimes that awareness recedes when an assignment is written, and problems can arise when the instructor forgets to consider whether the class shares common knowledge. This is particularly evident when some of the students in the class come from immigrant backgrounds, are non-native speakers of English, or are international students. Sometimes, the age gap between the instructor and the students shows up in assignments about things students can’t really know much about. Sometimes, the whole class has different cultural assumptions or are from different ethnic or economic or geographical settings. Consider the topics for following three assignments (the whole assignments are not included here, just the topics):

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1. American attitudes about mixed race schools have come a long way from the old segregated schools to present-day integration. Think of other major changes in American attitudes and actions over the last ten or twenty years. For example, think about how explicit films have become or how attitudes towards teen pregnancy have changed. Another example is how Americans have become so much more conscious about their health. Select one major change that you're interested in and discuss a personal experience of yours in noticing this change or that relates to it.

\* \* \* \*

2. Much has been made about the homogenization of America due to big box stores, chain restaurants, the elimination of regional differences due to these influences, etc. The short stories we've read in class about work and how it was defined years ago show us how different our views of work are now. Do you see a similar homogenization in how we earn our livings now in comparison as compared to the types of work our grandparents did? Discuss.

\* \* \* \*

3. [For an ESL class's first assignment)] Describe your first day in the United States and a few of the differences you noticed between your home country's culture and the culture that prevails in this country.

• • • •

That last assignment, #3, is a frequent one because it assumes the writer has knowledge the reader lacks and should be a fairly easy assignment in a beginning ESL class. When I met an ESL student in a tutorial who had a similar assignment, she needed help in finding a topic. She was a conscientious, motivated student, but utterly lost in terms of thinking she had sufficient

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awareness of the culture of the United States to make any valid comparisons. She could describe a number of vivid memories of her arrival in an American airport, but she had no knowledge of whether what she noticed was typical of American airports or whether it reflected anything about our culture. For example, among the memories she shared with me was one about the shops in that airport. She couldn't decide if the expensive, elegant shops there were indicative of American stores in general, if American airports cater primarily to wealthier people, or if the shops hoped to sell to tourists passing through (that is, is the assumption that most Americans who fly from one place to another are able to buy such items?).

The first two assignment summaries offered above require, among other things, some knowledge of the culture of the United States in the recent past. Moreover, the term "homogenization" in the second assignment assumes that students understand in some specific way what is meant by that term. Consider, for example, an immigrant student now in college, struggling to leave the confines of a neighborhood where other immigrants from his country have congregated and where, if "homogenization" has any meaning, it's that the stores and people mirror the culture he came from. But this does not only apply to those new to this country. At the large Midwestern land-grant institution where I tutored, some students who came there from very small towns or farms have little close acquaintance with highway exits where restaurants and hotel chains line the streets leading from the off ramp. Their parents might have welcomed the arrival of a box store fifty miles away, but it caused little or no change in their towns. What can "homogeneous" really mean to them?

### **Assuming Shared Views**

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When constructing assignments, we tend to work from what our own values are, what interests us, and what we hope will interest students. But biases have a nasty way of sneaking in so that students who don't share such views are likely to respond to what they think will please the instructor, the "give him what he wants to hear" axiom. That can result in writing that is not genuine because students are smart, pragmatic, and interested in their grades. They play to their audiences, or if they choose not to, they may decide to argue their way out of the viewpoint embedded in the assignment and hope the instructor will honor that. Consider the following assignment:

Select two ads from current magazines or TV ads and analyze them in terms of how they manipulate our emotions and how they overlap or coincide with the values of the power structure in our society.

Not every student in whatever class was given that assignment may be busy rebelling against the "power structure in our society." It's likely that some students hope their college degree moves them up the ladder of success toward entry into whatever power structure the instructor perceives to be out there. For those students who view the college degree as a successful entry into the jobs they want, there's no conflict. It would be an interesting bit of research to survey college freshmen to see how they actually view the ads they read, particularly when they're interested in learning how to update their iPods and iPhones, which cell phone to buy and what its plan offers, what the latest advances in cosmetics are, and which hot new band's music they need to buy or download.

### **Intimidating Novices**

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In some courses, instructors may want their students to write up to the level of the authors they have been reading or use those authors as models. Modeling has a long and honored tradition, but asking students to write to models can, depending on the model, require extensive examination of the model's writing and also extensive practice in writing to that model. It's not clear that without substantial preparation, students will respond with the level of writing called for in the following assignment:

Read Ahren's "The Great American Football Ritual" and Cleaves' "Blood Lust." Using these essays as models for your own writing, choose and define an activity (such as a sporting event, proms, IM-ing friends) as a symbol of some aspect of American society. Make sure your essay reveals more than just something about the activity; it should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys that activity.

Under the rubric of "intimidating novices," I include those assignments in which the instructor's word choices can cause the ordinary writer to quake before the expectations laid out for her:

Show in a precise manner how Dillman's definitions and relationships agree with your own. Use vivid, concrete examples to illustrate your understanding and to expand your reader's insight. You are expected to be in control of your subject, to think with analytical skill, not to pad with unnecessary words, and to display a mature understanding which synthesizes class work, discussion, and reading.

We can also intimidate students when we revert to the jargon of our field but haven't spent class time explaining the terms we are comfortable with to students for whom such words have not entered their lexicon:

For this 5- to 7-page formal paper, write an extended definition of the global village

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drawing on the essays read in class. Select at least two of the readings to use in your analysis and close reading. Choose readings that are in conversation, that are intertextual. From the texts, generate your own original claim, your own argument about how the writers imagine, deploy, use, and define the conjoined world we now live in.

Your paper by necessity will include a very brief synopsis of your chosen readings and will demonstrate your ability to close read each text. However, this assignment asks more from you than a compare and contrast paper. Remember that this paper is about your claim, your analysis, your ideas about what your readings are arguing, doing, critiquing, saying, or showing. Also remember that you are not just summarizing or repeating what your writers have written. You will be expected to critically analyze your texts and persuasively articulate how they reveal something significant about the globally connected world in which we live. Keep in mind your exigencies and your stakes for your paper.

### **A Potpourri of Other Problems**

When I asked the writing center people who read WCenter, the electronic listserv for those involved in writing center work, about the types of assignments they and their tutors found problematic for students, there were a variety of suggestions. Some noted that especially bewildering for students are assignments that are so short they lack almost all the needed information. Carol Mohrbacher offered a great example of this: "One of our grad tutors tried to help a student who brought in an 8 1/2 by 2-inch strip of paper that simply said, 'Write a 4-page essay using descriptive language.'" From a tutor's perspective, it is difficult to know if one-

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or two-sentence assignments are prompted by good intentions, mistaken perceptions about students' preferences, or lack of knowledge about what an effective assignment is.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is this assignment, recommended to me for this essay by Pamela Childers, that would require the writers in the secondary school class in which it was assigned to be masters of incredibly concise prose in order to respond to the topic within the required two pages:

#### Causes of World War I Essay

If you could narrow down all of the many causes of World War I, which event, incident, development or person would be most responsible? In a well-argued, well-written essay of at least 2 full pages in length, define based on what you have learned in class and from your textbook, what one factor contributed most to armed conflict. Explain why your choice was more decisive than all of the others and choose at least three less decisive factors and explain why your choice played a more pivotal role in creating war. This exercise will take the place of a traditional class exam and is based on pages 272-327 in our textbook. Each student will present their opinions to the class during our second meeting next week (the day the papers are due) and will submit their papers at the end of class. The successful 2-3 minute presentation of your ideas will account for 20% of your grade on this project. Please see the accompanying rubric for the presentation component of this project.

To further compound the question of length of assignment are those that run on for a page or two—or sometimes three, usually single-spaced. (For an example of such an assignment that is far too long see Appendix A.) While there may be students in these classes who will wade

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diligently through the dense prose, some will falter after the first few paragraphs and fail to notice some important part of the assignment buried in a long paragraph on another page.

While some instructors note that reading an assignment closely should be a skill students must learn, others offer different perspectives. In a listserv discussion for writing program administrators, WPA-L, Ryan Skinnell offers the following:

I think many students, myself included, believe assignments should function like directions. They should tell me the basic process and what to expect as a final product. Too much information can be as daunting as too little. I work under the assumption that the test is supposed to be the writing, the thinking, and the revision—not reading the prompt. Therefore, in my opinion, assignment sheets should have as little information as possible while still encouraging the type of writing I hope to get.

Trixie Smith noted that in a previous institution she worked at, some students who came to their writing center never had written assignment sheets because one faculty member always gave his assignments orally. Some students only had confused recollections of what the assignments entailed.

Kathryn Nielsen-Dube offered a different problem—the topic that causes students personal discomfort. The example she offered was as follows:

About two years ago a female student arrived in the writing center with an assignment from her FYC course. The instructor was a young, male adjunct. The assignment was to write a personal descriptive essay about a body part (of their own) that they did not like. Students were to state what the body part was and describe it effectively with plenty of descriptive details; then, the assignment went on to ask students to explain why they did not like the body part using examples of how it affected them physically and mentally. I

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will never forget the affect of this student as she told the tutor (with me present) how horrible the assignment had made her feel.

Finally, another topic designed for all the wrong reasons led Jeanne Simpson to offer the following:

Okay: worst assignment ever. A teacher assigned her 20 freshman students, in a summer class (6 weeks) to write a 10-page documented paper on penguins. Why? Because she had determined that there were apparently no penguin papers on file among the frats (this was before the Web shops where papers are easily bought and downloaded). The sole criterion for the topic was to avoid plagiarism. There was no discernible purpose, other than to prove an ability to write a documented paper. Worse, the instructor had not consulted with any librarian, so the library was suddenly overrun with students wanting all there was on penguins. Nothing was put on reserve. Books vanished and students despaired. My only consolation (I had to tutor one of her students) was that this teacher would have to read 20 unavoidably wretched papers. But she would of course blame the students, never imagining that her assignment was the real problem. A complete waste of time.

## **Conclusion**

My hope is that viewed from this perspective on types of assignment problems, along with some examples, problematic ones can be signposts for what we want to avoid. (See Appendix B for a set of guidelines summarizing some questions to ask when constructing assignments.) There are other ways to insure that an assignment will enable students to write effective papers. Some instructors suggest previewing the assignment with writing center tutors or the directors in the

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writing center on their campus or even with the class; others create the assignment together with the class. There are numerous methods that are limited only by the creativity of the teacher.

Reminding ourselves of positive ways to ensure good assignments is, of course, important, though I continue to also believe in the power of the bad example. There is added clarity when seeing how something can malfunction in addition to looking at how to make it work. As we create assignments, we can recognize that there are hurdles, mistakes, omissions, lack of clarity, and mistaken assumptions that we are all prone to, and they can result in papers we don't want to read and students don't want to write.

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## Appendix A

### Example of an Overly Long Writing Assignment

#### *Defining the Virtual New World of the internet*

In this course you have been reading, writing, thinking, and exploring different conceptualizations and articulations of the Internet. This should now lead you to thinking more deeply and critically about what this new space is, might be, and could be through the lenses of history, science, popular culture, and science fiction. Some have defined it as an imaginary space in which computer users travel when surfing the Net, and as such it is a far more generic term for the Internet than just the World Wide Web. The concept of the Internet may also include that imaginary place where online communication takes place and a virtual world which provides a heuristic to explore our inner beings. The ideal, the myth, the interstices of reality and imagination is, however, much more, and you may or may not agree with some of the conceptual formulations that are made.

This cyberspace is amazing, complex, full of potential, scary, imaginative, physically elusive, and so, finally, what is it? Is it the land of the free and the home of anyone and everyone willing and able to jump in? Is it the land of the lost and the home of the dark, dangerous, and deviant? Is it a place where dreams are lived, an avenue of commerce, a place for humans to reach across the globe to make contact? Is it all of the above? All of the writers you have read so far have offered their hopes, fears, praise, and cautions for cyberspace. They recognize that the technology and its concomitant stories are important, part of what is to come, and ultimately a reflection of ourselves as a culture, a world, a species. All of the writers then are trying to map, to imagine, and to define cyberspace. But think also about the inter-textual spaces that lie

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between these authors, especially the as-yet unexplored potential they haven't treated. In turn, inform your discourse with some understanding of the persona and stylistic turns used by the writers you have read.

For your 5- to 7-page formal paper, you will write an extended analytical definition of the world/space of the Internet, drawing on the short stories and essays read in class, plus class lectures and discussion, but focus most on the readings. Select at least two of the readings to use in your analysis and close reading. Choose readings that are in conversation. From the texts, generate your own original claim, your own argument about how the writers imagine, deploy, use, and define this space. Think about the following questions when you sit down to make your claim as they may help you come to a conclusion that you can then argue:

- Do the writers imagine and define the Internet similarly? How? Why is that important?
- Do the writers conceive of this space radically differently? How? Why is that important?
- What are the writers' arguments? What role or function does this virtual world play in life, in culture, in the text? How and what does the virtual world tell us about the world?
- Explore the recurring motifs, and draw on arguments that move through logos, pathos, and ethos for appeals.
- Do the writers' critique the creations that the Internet has made spaces for? What are the consequences or dangers of virtual worlds on the Internet?
- How are these virtual worlds described? Materialized? Used? Why is that important?

Consider the imagery employed. Are there paradoxes in the imagery that further

the argument?

—Ultimately, what can you argue with your writers' arguments about the virtual spaces?

Why is that important? Be self-reflexive.

Your paper by necessity will need to include a very brief synopsis of your chosen readings and will demonstrate your ability to closely read—and attend to—each text. However, this assignment asks more from you than a compare and contrast paper. Remember that this paper is about your claim, your analysis, your ideas about what your readings are arguing, doing, critiquing, saying, or showing. Also remember that you are not just summarizing or repeating what your writers have written, but that you understand what they offer. You will be expected to critically analyze your texts and persuasively articulate how they reveal something significant about the virtual world that exists on the Internet. Keep in mind the exigency for your paper.

Also keep in mind the course outcomes as you work and write. Your claim should be supported with valid evidence from the readings, directly quoting and citing the texts when necessary. You are required to include other outside sources (at least two, not to exceed five) including other texts read for this sequence, scholarly journals, and credible websites, newspapers, and magazines. To summarize, you should be prepared to make a solid and relevant claim using a coherent, complete, and clearly organized analysis of your readings by situating it within a particular and meaningful context, with clear evidence to support your argument.

**Audience:** At base, you are writing for an audience that includes a general academic community, which includes your instructor, your classmates, and the authors of the essays we have read.

You should imagine a larger, more inclusive audience. Keep in mind that your audience is varied in many ways, including academic experience and familiarity with our readings, so you'll

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need to consider of what information each type of reader will need to make sense of your essay. Another good way to think about your audience is to imagine the publication in which your essay could appear such as the Reading Contexts anthology or a website or scholarly journal.

**Format:** This assignment is a formal, academic paper and should follow the manuscript guidelines outlined in the course policies:

- formal title page, appropriate title for your paper
- 1 paragraph audience analysis
- 5-7 pages, typed, double-spaced, with MLA citations, stapled
- bibliography, correct and current MLA format

## Appendix B

### Guidelines for Developing Effective Assignments (Thus Avoiding Hellish Assignments that Utterly Confuse, Frustrate, and Lead Students to the Depths of Despair)

Muriel Harris, 2010

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Writing an effective assignment is a very challenging rhetorical task, but the questions to ask ourselves can lead to assignments that truly engage our students and help them produce strong writing. Listed here are some questions to ask yourself about each assignment.

#### 1. What are the goal(s) and purpose(s) of the assignment?

Articulating your goal(s) to yourself beforehand will guide you as you structure the assignment.

- Do you want your students to learn how to describe concretely?
- Do you want them to learn to write for different audiences?
- Do you want to assess their knowledge of content presented in class?
- Do you want them to practice critical reading and responding to texts they've read?
- Do you want them to learn the art of writing persuasive documents?
- Do you want them to sharpen research skills and practice citing sources correctly?

#### 2. What will your students need to know to complete the assignment effectively?

Students will write better papers when you are sure they all have the skills needed to write that paper.

- Have you checked the vocabulary used in the assignment? Are all the terms clear to all the students? Are there any vague generalities such as “have a tight organizational pattern”? Is the level of generality or specificity explained?
- Are you sure you haven't assumed a common background, view of the world, or knowledge of our culture that some students lack?
- Is the wording on the assignment sheet scary for the uninitiated? Does it contain intimidating phrases such as “carefully summarize and articulate in a clear and precise manner” or “synthesize in a mature way what you have learned from your class work, lectures, and readings”?
- Do your students have the necessary skills (library research? critical reading of complex texts? computer skills? practice in interviewing people?) to complete this assignment successfully?
- Have you indicated stages of drafting and possibilities for revision? Will you be reading any drafts-in-progress and offering feedback?
- Would your students benefit from seeing models for the genre of writing expected?

#### 3. What will your students be graded on?

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Students will focus more of their energy on what they think you will be grading for.

- Does the assignment clearly indicate a hierarchy that lists what the criteria are? Be specific about length of the paper, deadline, formatting concerns, and other requirements, but don't make these instructions dominate the assignment sheet. State any hierarchy you may have for grading by listing which writing skills are more important and which are less important.
- Does the assignment sheet spend too much time emphasizing the less important criteria?
- Have you spent time discussing your students' perceptions regarding what really constitutes an A paper?
- Have you considered having a class discussion about what students think the assignment is asking for? You can ask what they think the goal is, what they think the standards should be for good papers, what previous teachers have stated as qualities of a good paper, what additional assumptions they have (the longer, the better? having "new" ideas, being grammatically correct? playing to what the teacher thinks?).

#### **4. Does the assignment offer clear choices for the student?**

Students who have to write about topics for which they have no interest are not likely to care very much about what they write.

- If you offer questions to think about, is it clear that students don't have to answer all the questions?
- Have you either offered a topic that will interest all of the students or offered choices of topics so that all the students can find one that engages their interest?

#### **5. Is the assignment sheet a visually clear document?**

Students may lack the ability to read and comprehend long blocks of closely spaced print with no spacing or subheads to indicate various aspects of the assignment and may miss some of the information you are including.

- Is the assignment reasonably short, but not so short that it doesn't contain relevant information?
- Does the assignment sheet expect that students will have to wade through a page or two of dense prose to figure out what the assignment is?
- Are there headings and subheadings that make the assignment more readable?