



Designing Writing Assignments

Carefully designed writing assignments help ensure that your seminar meets the goals of the First-Year Odyssey Program. They can help you “introduce” your students “to the importance of learning and academics” in order to “engage them in the academic culture of the University” (FYOS, Goal 1). Moreover, they give students “the opportunity for meaningful dialogue” with you “to encourage positive, sustained student-faculty interactions” (Goal 2), and they can function as occasions to introduce students to the missions of the university (Goal 3).

According to Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj, writing assignments “constitute one of the two most important kinds of writing we do for our students. The other is our written responses to their [work]” (*The Elements of Teaching Writing* 30). As the impetus for student performance, a writing assignment must provide students with enough information to proceed carefully. Students should be able to answer the following questions:

- What am I writing about?
- For whom?
- Why? (Is this assignment reflective, evaluative, descriptive?)
- In what format? (length, font-size and type, specific media, multiple drafts, etc.)
- How will I be evaluated?

Assignments that provide students these essential data will encourage results more consistent with the products we imagine and make the assignment more manageable for our students. Undergraduates, especially Freshmen, require this guidance because they have not yet been initiated into the kinds of academic discourse in which we participate. A clearly articulated writing assignment is also a great opportunity to share with students how their writing assignments pair with FYOS and/or individual course goals.

Assignment	Strengths	Weaknesses
What is Steven Pinker’s central argument in <i>How the Mind Works</i> , and whom is he arguing against?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear topic of inquiry ● Moderate sense of direction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No sense of format, audience, or evaluative criteria ● No definition of purpose behind assignment
In four pages, explain what you consider to be the most important argument in Steven Pinker’s <i>How the Mind Works</i> , with examples and quotations that support your interpretation. There are several themes you might reasonably choose to emphasize. I want to know which one you consider the most important, and how well you can make your case to illustrate your control of the material.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear topic of inquiry ● Sense of direction, audience, and length ● Moderate outline of evaluator’s expectations ● Provides students with an opportunity to find their own personal investments in the assignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does not completely address formatting (line-spacing, title, etc.) ● Could better describe evaluative criteria

Assignment Checklist:

- Can students answer basic questions about the subject, audience, purpose, and form of their work?
- Do my students understand how their work will be evaluated?
- Have I set clear boundaries in terms of content, method, and format for my assignment?