

WRITING WORKSHOP BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

A Brief Guide to FYS Assignments

Five Tips for Designing Assignments for FYS courses

1. Assign informal, process-oriented writing.

These assignments get students writing frequently and boost confidence. They help students focus on a particular aspect of the writing process such as digging into the reading, analyzing evidence, getting thoughts on the page, or moving from an outline to a paragraph. They also enable teachers to offer supportive feedback, for instance by commenting on students' ideas, asking questions, or simply praising something intriguing or worthy.

2. Incorporate revision.

You can require students to hand in a full or partial draft of one of their essays, or simply allow them to revise if they wish. Either way, ask them to hand in the revision, the original/draft with your comments, and a description of what they have changed.

3. Double up.

Ask students to do something twice, in two different ways. Two outlines, one for a response paper, the other for a research paper. Or two summaries, one for grade-school students, the other for experts. Or two paragraphs making different arguments about the same body of evidence. Such exercises cultivate in students a sense of agency as writers by showing them that they can communicate their knowledge in multiple ways.

4. Identify who, when, what, and why.

To encourage students to approach writing as communication, identify an audience, even if it's simply you. Specify deadlines and expectations about length and format (argument, synthesis, description, analysis, etc.). And describe the purpose of the assignment. If you want students to master a concept, for instance, or to see how good reading leads to strong writing, or to employ your discipline's specific methods, say so.

5. State goals and focus feedback on them.

A big challenge in teaching writing is that we might, and often feel we *should*, provide feedback about any aspect of a student's paper. But this is exhausting for us as teachers, and it can be overwhelming for students, giving them too much feedback to really use. Instead, it can be helpful to enumerate two or three goals for each paper and then focus your feedback on them. Providing this structure to your assignment sheets and your feedback can also reduce students' anxiety about grades and help them focus their energies on the aspects of their writing that you want them to attend to at particular stages in the course. It also makes the task of evaluating and responding to student writing both less time-consuming and more effective.

