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This Digest considers the one thing that all English teachers do--make reading and writing assignments. Since learning to do this well is so basic that, if you can't do it, you are likely to be headed for some other occupation, there is no point in pretending to have a formula for producing good reading and writing assignments that other English teachers don't already know. A reminder, however, about what goes into the preparation of even the shortest in-class exercise--as well as a long research project--might be in order. Four questions can be raised whose answers determine the nature of the reading and writing assignments we English teachers make. (For a research foundation, see Irwin and Doyle, 1992).

I. WHO ARE THE STUDENTS?

Many of today's students are older and more career minded than those of even a few years ago. For example, Ferris State University, where I, Douglas Haneline, teach, is an open-admissions state university in Michigan. The programs emphasize career preparation in health, business, and technical subjects, so the students, while often quite directed in terms of career goals, have extremely varied educational backgrounds, reading levels, and writing skills. Since their level of general knowledge is frequently low, the use of casebooks to create common background among the students is one effective technique (Haneline, 1994). Since every paper in the course is written on a subject from the casebook, the students' acquisition of knowledge is progressive: with each assignment, they have learned something more about the topic.

II. WHY ARE THE STUDENTS IN COLLEGE?

The students at Ferris State are there because they have certain career goals and college is the way to fulfill them. This means that post-graduation is a major--though not the only--consideration. Part of an English teachers' job at Ferris State, then, is to make the students more employable, to give them skills in research, reading, arguing, and editing, as well as habits of listening, following directions, being meticulous, and finishing their work on time. Their teachers also want them to learn more--about the world, about being good citizens, about language, about themselves.

III. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE COURSE IN WHICH THE ASSIGNMENT IS

BEING GIVEN? In my case, I teach multiple sections of a sophomore-level research writing course. These students have already taken at least one, and, if they needed developmental English, two writing courses in college. Prior to that, of course, they have had as many as twelve years of language instruction in elementary, junior high, and high school. If they graduate with a four-year degree from Ferris State, they will take a

junior-level writing course or a cluster of writing-intensive courses after the sophomore-level course. At the end of my course, I want my students to do library research, read skillfully for information, argue and persuade (Crowhurst wrote in 1991: "persuasive writing is cognitively difficult...but the ability to write persuasion can be improved by instruction"), reason from data, prepare simple graphics, and be more self-sufficient in writing, organizing, and editing their own work. Any assignment given in English 250 is geared toward these goals, and they are reachable goals.

One technique that helps students improve their reading and writing skills is the use of a reading log. By writing while reading, students can learn to organize their thoughts, and after habitually writing in response to reading, they can learn to clarify and refine their thoughts. Through activities centered around the reading log, the students can elucidate several aspects of their thought processes: using the reading log as a "response journal," they can discover ideas; using it as a "text-into-meaning journal," they can rethink ideas; and using it as a process journal," they can regulate their reading habits (Cobine, 1995).

IV. WHAT ARE THE DESIRED OUTCOMES OF THE ASSIGNMENT?

The reading part of the assignment involves students taking in information and making it their own. The English teacher's role in making this happen means that he or she has to allot sufficient time for students to read often complex material. "A reader, like an actor, may have to get to the end to know how to deal with the beginning...reading is not merely decoding" (Root, 1991). The teacher also has to schedule discussion time in class--and, bear in mind, most young Americans today are not as print-oriented as older generations are. The instructor needs to guide them, usually in an individual conference, toward a focus that they will actually be able to write on. This usually means little topics, not big ones. Each assignment should call for a specific written product, and the product should be geared toward invisible but important learning and performance goals. So that, "...By writing about something individuals come to know more than they did before writing" (Schumacher and Nash, 1991).

Readers have probably divined from my remarks so far that I believe that English teachers should have fairly specific expectations in mind when they ask their students to read and write. In my case, this is done on purpose. I tell the students that I am not the last person who will judge their writing, but that I may be the last person to reveal what his or her judgments are. So I prefer to sin in the direction of being overly specific.

All students, however modest their abilities may seem at times, can learn a great deal about reading and writing, and possession of these skills can open up real possibilities in their working and personal lives. For teachers, researchers, and all who are concerned with education, the creation of new knowledge and the reconceptualization of old knowledge is of immense importance (Schumacher and Nash, 1991). To prepare

our students to function in the workplace and to give them the basis of career and personal growth, we teachers need to challenge them, while at the same time we need to offer them a helping hand when they need it. We may then help them become the selves that are present but latent inside them.

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