

Commentary On

Interpreting University Instructors' Writing Prompts:

How Students' Struggle with Understanding Post-Secondary Assignments

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article was to look at some of the issues students have with reading and interpreting their instructors' post-secondary writing prompts. Every student, who attends a post-secondary institution, will at some point in their university/college career be asked to submit a writing assignment of some kind. The most common assignment in post-secondary institutions remains the research essay. The first problem, with these assignments, arises due to the name of the assignment. Some instructors call it an argumentative essay, some call it a persuasive essay, some call it an explanatory essay, and some call it a research paper. In most cases the instructors expect the same assignment despite the different names. They expect a research paper incorporating evidence using direct quotes, paraphrases, or summaries of the information found in journals or books. One of the problems with these types of assignments is that the students' often do not understand what they are meant to do because they do not understand the writing prompts provided by their instructors. Instructors may think that their prompts are crystal clear but students may think otherwise. This article looks at the problems that occur when instructors and students are not in sync with each other. This mismatch often leads to papers that are not what the instructor intended and thus students do not get the grade they expected through no fault of their own.

## **Introduction**

University and college writing assignments are the elephant in the room. Most professors and instructors would rather not talk about them even though everyone assigns them. The current research on assignments provided in post-secondary institutions focuses on instructor expectations in terms of topic choice, research skills, formatting, and final products (Donham, 2014). There is no data provided on the types of assignment prompts that are regularly used to get students to write in university and college courses. Coyle (2010) observed that academic writing assignments often “focus on testing knowledge. They require defining concepts or terms and supporting statements with references to professional literature” (p. 196). Brockman, Taylor, Kreth, and Crawford (2011) said that when instructors assign writing tasks they are designed to “help students learn class concepts and, further that assignments either focus or require an ability to read, understand, and manage source materials” (p. 77). Two of the issues pinpointed, by the authors, were that not only did students not understand what was expected of them when looking at the writing prompts, but they also did not follow directions which was a problem when completing course assignments.

Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010), in their research of assignments in a Canadian college, examined syllabi from different departments, and found that almost all instructors’ asked their students to write papers as part of their course. The problem, the authors identified, was that although the assignments had the same name each instructor expected different things and graded for different elements. Similarly, Shaver (2007) noted that an issue with writing assignments is that writing terms are not clearly defined and provide little information to students about what is expected in individual assignments. Hood (2010) also found that 83% of writing assignments, in university and college, require a paper based on the student’s ability to do

research. This involves their understanding of how to quote, paraphrase, and summarize information in their essays. It is a fact that almost every course, at the university level, requires writing of some kind. Even those courses that were once considered free of writing assignments are now requiring their students to submit writing assignments as part of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) curriculum. Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (2011) came to the conclusion that, “since words are our primary means of communicating, anyone who has not mastered their creative use is simply underprepared for any discipline, including STEM subjects” (para.5). These findings underscore the importance of the writing assignment in post-secondary courses.

The problem with many writing assignments, in post-secondary institutions, is that they are not clear to the students. Instructors may know what kind of assignment they want but are not able to fully articulate that to their students. It is no wonder that when students hand in assignments they often feel like they are playing Russian roulette. They have no idea if what they have handed in is what their instructor wanted. And, instructors when grading those assignments often wonder if they are speaking the same language as their students. This frequently leads to instructors asking themselves how two students can read the exact same writing prompt and come up with two entirely different assignments. The answer may be the writing prompt itself and how it is scripted.

Each person, who reads an assignment, puts their own interpretation on what it is they read which is why there is often a disconnect between the kinds of assignments instructors set for their students and the interpretation that their students bring to the assignment. This is one of the issues with assignment topics. Everyone brings their own understanding to what they read. Therefore, the words used in an assignment must be carefully chosen so that students can

comprehend what they are being asked to do. In other words, the instructor's expectations and the students' understanding must align. Without that alignment students are left to make their own decisions as to what is required. If they do not understand the assignment they make up their own assignment and therein lies the problem. What an instructor thinks is a brilliant writing prompt may not get the desired results because of how the students translate that prompt when completing the assignment.

### **Writing Prompts and Student Success**

How successful students are when completing assignments depends to a large extent on the types of writing prompts used in the class. The writing prompt is more important than some instructors are willing to admit. A poorly written writing prompt will ensure that students hand in poorly thought out assignments. Conversely, a good writing prompt will give students something to think about and will result in more effective assignments. If the writing prompt is so important why are some instructors not spending more time on formulating their prompts before they give the assignment? The answer may be that when assigning writing assignments, to their students, instructors do not give the process much thought because they are so familiar with the topics. They know the subject so they create writing prompts based on the course content and then hand them out to students to decipher. This haphazard approach to writing prompts leads to haphazard writing from students. In this case, both the instructor and the student are dissatisfied with the results.

The purpose of writing a research paper is twofold: 1) a research paper allows students to find out information about some part of the subject and write a paper detailing what they have read. This allows students to better understand the topic and get them to think about the topic in more detail; and 2) a research paper provides the professor with a benchmark to see if the

students actually understand the main concepts of the course. When papers are graded, the markers, whether that is the professor or a marking assistant, look for specific criteria that was established for each assignment. These grading rubrics are necessary so that the students know what their instructors are looking for when completing assignments. Without these criteria the students are left to guess what it is they are meant to do. This is not an efficient way to learn.

Another issue is that the types of assignments, assigned at the university/college level vary by department, subject, and individual instructors. Gardner and Nesi (2013), in their analysis of the most common types of writing assignments in university, identified the following as representative: essays, reports, journals, case studies, literature surveys, and proposals. The types of essays also varied with some instructors asking for explanatory essays, some assigned opinion essays, still others chose persuasive essays, and the majority still expected an argumentative essay. Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010) stated that the “most common type of assignment [in university] was the term or research paper [63%]” (p. 293). This finding was corroborated by Melzer (2003) who also said that the majority of assignments (84%) were designed to inform or persuade the reader.

One of the major problems, identified by students, is the lack of understanding of the topics assigned. As mentioned, many assignments handed out to students are so broad that it is difficult for students to know how to narrow their focus. The issue is that instructors who teach courses that require writing and research do not usually take the time to teach their students how to write. It is assumed that all students entering university know how to write. This is true to some extent. Students do know how to write sentences and use those sentences to write paragraphs but they do not know how to write in each specific discipline and yet instructors regularly expect their students to write like experts in their field. This is an unrealistic

expectation and could explain why students' grades are not as high as they expected when they handed in their assignment.

### **Assignment Criteria**

Assignment length varies among instructors with some assigning papers that are under a page to some assignments requiring twenty or more pages. Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010) characterized most assignments, at the post-secondary level, as requiring four pages or less of text. There are also a confusing number of formatting styles that students must learn for each course. Often, the criteria varies, from instructor to instructor, even within the same department. Decisions about length of assignment, formatting, and assignment criteria must be made before instructors can formulate writing prompts. In addition, instructors should always have a purpose for assigning written papers. And, the purpose should not be just because they have to give students a grade in their courses, or because it is what they are expected to do. As previously mentioned, many instructors use writing assignments to see if their students understood the content of the course and some assignments are designed to see if students are able to think critically.

Writing prompts should get students to think deeply about a topic. They should be ones that will get them excited to learn more. Topics that will send them to their computers to look up information. Okay, maybe that is asking too much from one writing prompt but at least the assignments provided should be challenging enough so that instructors will actually get assignments that are interesting to read. You may think that all assignments are created equal. They're not. The myriad types of assignments that university instructors provide are as varied as the instructor themselves. Every instructor, in every classroom, sets their own assignments

unless the course is administered by a program coordinator who tells everyone what assignments he/she will be using.

In her discussion of the types of assignments that students are asked to complete Carlino (2012) wrote that when writing in disciplines is assigned, if writing about the topic is essential for learning to occur, this can be thought of as *woven* into the fabric of a course, when writing about the topic is essential to learning. She contrasts this with assignments that are *sewn* on to the fabric of a course, as *inessential decoration*. The example that she used was when a teacher modifies a course to include a mandatory writing assignment to meet a general education requirement, but who could just as easily remove the assignment without affecting student outcomes, is into sewing, but when one needs to write to understand an idea that is weaving.

### **Unpacking the Prompt**

Who determines if the writing prompt is effective? The students. They are the ones tasked with completing the assignment. If the assignment is too vague, or too complex, the students will suffer. They won't know what to do. And, then the instructors will complain that their students are not prepared for their course because their assignments are not what the instructors were expecting. When university students' essays do not measure up to expectations, instructors are quick to blame the students. They discuss with their colleagues the poor writing skills of their students. They point to high school teachers as the culprits for not doing their jobs. But what if one of the problems was not the students but the types of assignments given out in university/college level courses? If assignments are too vague students will not be able to write an effective essay because they are not sure what to do. If assignments are too broad students risk writing about a part of the topic that their instructors did not intend. If the writing prompts



try to provide too much information then students are just as confused as they are with those assignments that do not provide enough information.

Choosing a topic to write an essay on is one that university students struggle with every term. It is made harder when essay topics are assigned by the instructor. Often times students have to spend time trying to interpret the topics before they can make a writing choice. Essay topics should not be so difficult to decipher that students are left wondering what to do. Instructors do not appear to give much thought to what they are asking their students to write about based on the writing prompts I have read over the years. Sometimes the writing prompts are so abstract and filled with information that is not necessary that students cannot tease out the actual topic. There seems to be this dichotomy between what the instructor wants and what they get which is a direct result of the writing prompts not being clear and straightforward.

I once worked in a department where the program coordinator came up with what he thought were clever topics that students had to write argumentative essays on. If they were actually clever is up for debate, as I thought they were just bad writing prompts. The topics themselves were not the problem, it was the way they were phrased and the amount of superfluous information provided which made it almost impossible for the students to understand. It was difficult for those of us who were not inside the head of the program coordinator to understand either, which made it almost impossible to discuss the prompts with the students. Therein lies the problem with writing prompts. When only the person providing the prompts understands what kind of an essay he is looking for then the students are at a loss, and the essays that are written are so superficial that reading them becomes a chore. Whenever I questioned him about the topics and told him that the students would not understand what they were meant to do he would just shake his head and say that they should understand. The sad fact

was that they didn't. I argued successfully for him to let me use my own topics citing the need to be able to explain what the students were meant to do when talking to them.

### **Procrastination**

Why is it that students, in general, wait until the last minute to do their writing assignments? The answer may be because the assignments are too broad, too confusing, or not interesting enough. I teach writing at a university level and my students have, over the years, shown me assignments from other classes they were taking at the same time as my class. These assignments were designed to get students to write and hopefully learn about the subject they were studying. The problem arose when the students did not understand what they are supposed to do or were confused about what to do. I have to admit that when I read over some of their essay topics I was equally as confused as the students. This is why university/college instructors cannot expect students to do their best work if they do not know what it is they are expected to do, or if the writing assignments are too vague, too convoluted, or too confusing.

When students are having difficulties beginning writing assignments they often turn to tutors to help them get started. However, writing tutors can only help those students who can articulate what it is they are meant to write. Students who go to writing tutors are often annoyed that their tutor cannot help them with the specifics of the assignment. They are, for the most part, not going to writing tutors because they can't write. They are going to writing tutors because they do not understand what they are supposed to be doing. Writing centres are not designed to help individual students write individual assignments for individual classes. Instead writing centres are designed to help with more generic skills like how to write a thesis statement, how to incorporate information into an essay, and how to format the essay. In many cases this is not what the student goes to the writing centre to get help with. When speaking to teaching

assistants and writing tutors, it becomes clear, that when students have difficulty writing an assignment it is because the writing prompts are not clear. The students have no idea what they are meant to do, and the teaching assistants and tutors can't help them because they are not subject specialists and therefore, they also do not know what the instructor expects their students to write about.

### **Student Selected Topics versus Prescription Essay Topics**

Both types of essays, student selected and teacher assigned, are provided to students in post-secondary institutions. When assignments are student selected, students get to choose their own topics to research and write about. Instructors hope that by allowing students to choose their own topic that the essays will reflect their best work. It stands to reason that if someone is interested in a topic that they will actively look for evidence to support their claims. The other benefit, for students and instructors, is that the topics will be varied and will lead to some interesting discussions in class. When the instructor prescribes topics, students are often not interested in the topics, and their essays reflect that disinterest. Sometimes instructors have no choice but to provide essay topics because they are interested in seeing how much students have learned in their course. The debate continues between allowing students to choose their own assignments and having the assignments provided.

The course, I teach, is a first-year writing course so students have more freedom in choosing a topic than if I was teaching a specific subject. For my first-year university students I have them write a 1500 word *informed* opinion essay. They choose the topic they want to write on, come up with a thesis, and then conduct research to support their opinion. In the three years that I have gone with this format, I am constantly amazed at the topics that they choose to write on. I have had essays, in separate terms, discuss the differences between how Eastern parents

raise their children and how Western parents raise their children. The students who came up with this topic went with the stance that the Western style of parenting was better. They provided personal examples of how they were raised by their Eastern parents. The essays were well-done and had a real sense of purpose about them. They both really wanted to convey to me the main differences and how those differences had impacted their ability to function on their own after being raised by parents who made all the decisions for them growing up. I learned a lot from those essays. Things I was not aware of.

Another student wrote a paper on Kashmir, the disputed territory between India and Pakistan. His position was that Kashmir should be given to Pakistan and one of his reasons was that 75% of Kashmir residents are Muslim. Since Pakistan is a Muslim country he argued that Kashmir should become part of Pakistan. He was from Pakistan so spoke of the wars that have been fought between India and Pakistan throughout the years over Kashmir. It is a shocking thing to admit but I had never even heard of Kashmir before I read this student's essay. This is the best part of letting students choose their own topics as they are not only passionate about the topic but they can teach their instructors something in the process. I was so interested in the topic that I went and researched it for myself. This is the hallmark of a good essay. It makes the reader think.

One of my students wrote about the lack of medical abortions available in her country and how many women died from getting abortions from untrained personnel. It was an interesting read because she spoke about women she knew who had to get an abortion because they could not afford to care for another child. It was also very enlightening. Similarly, a student wrote an essay on how women in her home country, of South Korea, are almost forced into getting cosmetic surgery because of the need to look like everyone else. She had never

resorted to getting cosmetic surgery herself but argued that she probably would have had she stayed in South Korea. In addition, one of the students wrote about how in South Korea there is mandatory military service for men and she argued that it is a good policy and should be extended to women.

These are only a sampling of the topics that students came up with when given the opportunity to choose their own topics. Granted this was a class of International Students who have experienced more things in their lives than their Canadian counterparts. I also give the same assignment to my Canadian students and their essays are not as varied and rich as the International students who come from different cultures and living conditions. It is difficult for the Canadian students to form opinions on controversial topics since they live in a country that does not have much controversy. It limits what they can write about.

In contrast, when assignments are provided by the instructors, they are often ambiguous or so general that students do not know what to do. For example, if an instructor assigns a 1500 word essay on the causes of the Civil War. In this example, there were so many things that led to the Civil War that it would be difficult for a student to know what their professor wants. Do they want all the causes, four causes, or two causes? How far back do they expect students to go looking for information? Due to the vagueness of the assignment topic, students and professors are both going to be frustrated with the results.

In many cases when professors complain about their students' ability to write effective essays the fault is not with the student but instead it is a problem with the assignment and how it is worded. There is often a mismatch between what the professor expects and what the students think their professor expects. Many a good writer has been undone by the topic assigned. And,

many good professors have become frustrated with students who do not do the assignment that was assigned.

### **Mismatch of Topics and Essay**

One of the issues with writing prompts is that the instructor knows what kind of an essay he/she wants but the prompts ask students to write a different kind of essay. For example: if a course is teaching students how to write an argumentative essay, complete with scholarly references, but then provides writing prompts that ask students for their opinion, and the topics are so current that students have to use non-scholarly sources such as blogs, magazines, newspapers, online news sources including television stations as evidence, what is a student to do? The worst part of these mismatched assignments is that both the professor and/or his/her marking assistants will grade it as an argumentative essay. This is not fair for the students and results in grades that are lower than they should be.

### **Grading the Assignment**

In order to grade an assignment, instructors have to be able to articulate what exactly it is they are looking for in the completed paper. This translates into what types of assignments they want. Is it going to be a descriptive essay, a compare and contrast essay, a research paper, an explanatory paper, a persuasive paper, or an argumentative essay? When instructors fail to provide enough guidance to their students, the students have no idea what they are supposed to do. In the absence of clear guidelines they resort to writing a paper following a format that they have written before. Sometimes they get lucky and it is exactly the right essay for that class but more likely than not it is not the correct type of essay and they fail. The main problem with grading assignments, especially if the instructor uses marking assistants, is that before it gets handed in two things take place: 1) the teaching assistants interpret and translate the professor's

assignment for their individual sections, and 2) the students also interpret and translate the writing prompts based on their individual section leader's interpretation. It is no wonder the prompts change over the course of different interpretations.

### **The Long-Drawn Out Writing Prompts**

These can also be called *Pulled from the Headlines* prompts. There is too much information provided, about the topic, in an attempt to make the assignment clearer. In fact, what it does is make it so confusing for the students that they have no idea what to focus on. The instructors, in these cases, are trying too hard to be relevant. In many cases, the writing prompts are more suitable for graduate level courses than first-year courses. For example:

The World Wide Web revolutionized society in much the same way that airplanes revolutionized people's ability to travel the world. Now, there is no need to get on an airplane to see the world. One only has to log onto the internet and look up places that were once only visible to people who visited those areas. Now, anyone can use virtual technology to travel to any place they want with the click of a mouse. Almost everyone has at one time or another used the web to search for information to complete a school assignment, to find a recipe, or to locate an item they wish to purchase. Explore what society would be like if the World Wide Web had never been invented in 1989.

What exactly is the instructor looking for in this assignment? I don't blame you if you are confused. I am too. The last line is the assignment but are students supposed to focus on using the internet to see the world? Why did the instructor give all the information about travelling to other countries? Are they meant to discuss everything that the web does for people? You can see, from this example, that the too long prompt just confuses the reader.

### **The Too-Brief Prompts**

Unlike the long-drawn out prompts, the too brief prompts do not provide any information. Students are left to guess what they are meant to do. Examples include:

- 1) What are some of the reasons why people do not vote?
- 2) Knowing a second language is important. Do you agree or disagree?
- 3) Think of someone you thought was an effective leader. What made them effective?
- 4) What do you think is a serious health concern that is being overlooked? Describe in detail.

While these essay prompts might be interesting to some students they would still find it difficult to narrow their essays into something manageable. They might also have difficulties finding evidence depending on the type of essay they are being asked to complete.

### **The Confusing Assignment**

Some instructors think that providing only basic guidelines will result in great essays. An assignment such as: In a literature course in which students would investigate a topic based on novels read, the professor advised, “Spend some time exploring a topic of interest to you. This interest may have been prompted by a long-standing enthusiasm on your part, by your initial reading of the novel, or by your examination of the additional material provided in our editions of the novels” (Donham, 2014, p. 14). What does this assignment expect? It expects students to investigate a topic of choice related to a book that was assigned in class. But what kind of topics are suitable? If students choose topics that are not suitable, as deemed by their instructor, does this mean that they will fail the assignment?



**No Guidelines**

Some professors think it will be easier for their students to write an assignment if they do not provide specific guidelines. For example, they may tell their students to format the essay however they want, as long as they provide the pertinent information. But the problem is that the pertinent information provided depends on the type of format used.

Riddell (2015) stated that “clear and transparent expectations significantly influence student perceptions of learning, that carefully scaffolded assignments help students develop their writing skills over time” (p. 80). She goes on to say that “when course expectations are clearly communicated from the outset, students have higher learning outcomes and increased gains in competencies such as critical thinking and writing skills” (p. 81).

Instructors may fail to indicate what kinds of evidence will be accepted. Are they going to accept personal experience as evidence? Do they only want evidence from reputable journals and/or books? And, how many sources should students use in their essays? Will one or two be sufficient, are instructors expecting four or five, or more? Without these guidelines students will end up either citing too few or citing too many. These kinds of decisions should not be left up to the students.

Instructors often do not indicate an approximate length of essay. Do they want a two page, a five page, a ten page, a twenty page, or something longer? Graves et al. (2010) said that “more than a third of assignments did not indicate a length requirement” (p. 312) making it difficult for students to complete the assignment successfully.

Some instructors do not provide a rubric indicating what they are looking for. There is no understanding of expectations provided to the students. The instructor might know what they

want but cannot convey it to the students or marking assistants. Interestingly, Graves et al. (2010) found that 70% of university assignments do not include rubrics of any kind.

### **Grammar**

Is grammar going to be emphasized over content? Or will it be marked instead of content? The instructor might say they want to emphasize thinking but the assignment then assigns a disproportionate amount of marks for grammar. This sends a mixed message to students.

### **Inflation of Grades**

When instructors provide marks for things like formatting, word choice, references, and readability than the grades are going to be inflated. The majority of grades go to something that has nothing to do with the content of the assignments.

### **What should a Good Essay Assignment Include?**

Every class will have different specific expectations for what a good assignment will include but there are some general expectations that instructors should be aware of if they want their students to write more effective papers. In the following suggestions I have highlighted the strategies that instructors should keep in mind when they are deciding on their writing prompts for the term.

- 1) **A clear purpose** – instructors should ask themselves why they are getting students to write. In other words, what is their purpose for assigning a writing component in their course? If they do not have a good reason for assigning an assignment that requires writing then they should know that the assignment is not a good one. Remember Carlino's (2012) distinction between weaving and sewing assignments. If the course can carry on without a writing component than the course will be trying to

sew assignments onto the course for decorative purposes. But, if students are actually going to learn something from writing a paper than the assignment is woven into the course as a way for students to show their understanding of the course concepts.

Instructors should ask themselves if you want to be a weaver or a sewer.

- 2) **Difficulty Level** – instructors should not have first-year students try to write graduate level assignments. This is one of the difficulties with instructors that are experts in their field, and that would include everyone who teaches at the university/college level. Students are lucky to have instructors who are experts because they bring a lot of knowledge and passion to their course, however, they also have so much knowledge that they sometimes forget that their students are novice learners. Thus the writing prompts ask students to display a level of understanding that they don't have and won't have unless they are graduate students in the field.
- 3) **Ambiguity** – make sure topics are phrased so they are clear. The use of ambiguous terms can trip a student up when they are attempting to decipher the assignment. Students can't make good decisions about the topic they want to write on if they do not have the necessary background knowledge to be able to unpack the writing prompt.
- 4) **Expectations** – what genre are instructors looking for? Instructors should make sure students know what they are expecting. This is one area that students struggle with. They are not sure what kind of an essay their instructors are expecting and no matter how well written the paper is, if it does not match the instructors' expectations they will fail. It is not right to set students up to fail before they have a chance to begin.

- 5) **Genres** – instructors should not expect one type of essay but handicap students by not providing the resources they need to be successful. When asking students to write a paper, for the course, instructors have to make sure that they understand what type of essay they are looking for. If instructors want students to write an essay that just explains a topic but they think their instructor wants an argumentative essay then there is going to be a clash of expectations and the students are the ones who will lose out. Instructors need to take the time to go over what they want and the students will have a greater chance of success.
- 6) **Rubrics** – every instructor should provide a rubric for all assignments. They need to make sure there is a wide enough range of marks so they can grade according to how close students come to meeting their expectations. All instructors have a set of expectations for all assignments given out in their courses. The problem arises when instructors do not take the time to let their students know what they are expecting and what the students will be graded on. It makes sense if both the instructor and the students are operating with the same criteria for the type of essay required for that particular assignment. It does not help students if a rubric is attached to the assignments when they are handed back. That information should be provided before the students complete the assignment. Without those criteria the students are operating in the dark and can't possibly hit the target of the assignment.

## **Conclusion**

When writing prompts do not garner the desired results it is time to look at the prompts being used. Since instructors are so familiar with their subject area they often think they are being clear in their expectations but in fact they are not. Students deserve to have assignments

that they can be successful at and not have assignments that handicap them before they even begin. When students do not have a firm grasp of the topics assigned then that means the assignment is not an effective one. It is important that instructors take the time to formulate writing prompts that will be understood by the majority of students in their course. If students are handing in assignments that are not consistent with their instructor expectations then something is wrong. It is easy to blame the students for not writing good papers but the fault may lie in the writing prompts themselves. If instructors find that their students consistently hand in papers that are not acceptable then maybe it is time to look over the prompts they are using in their classroom.

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