WHAT WE SAY, WHAT THEY HEAR

Assignments Lost in Translation

Presented by
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The Writing Center
INTRODUCTION

• The conflicting expectations and assumptions of students and faculty about assignments can interfere with teaching and learning.

• In this presentation, we will share insights from our experiences working one-to-one with hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students.

• We will also offer some suggestions for resolving such misunderstandings.
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN STUDENTS MISINTERPRET ASSIGNMENTS...

A Reenactment

By Veronica Garrison-Joyner, Writing Consultant, MA 2016
What we say...

"Analyze the text."

What it means...

"Separate into constituent parts and examine critically."
"Analyze the text? What does that even mean?"

She must want me to explain it and add my own commentary.
WHEN A QUESTION IS NOT CLEAR, IT BECOMES THE STUDENT’S RESPONSIBILITY TO CONSTRUCT A CLEAR QUESTION AND THEN ANSWER IT.

-Edward M. White

From Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher’s Guide
What we say.. "Synthesize the ideas discussed in these texts."

What it means... "Combine or bring together different parts or ideas"
"Synthesize..."

What they hear...

Write one essay about all of these ideas?
When students do not understand exactly what they are expected to do, the confusion often leads to a sense of overwhelm, or an over-analysis of the question.
What we say..

"Discuss one of the following issues."

What it means...

"Explain or consider by argument, comment, etc. Explore and evaluate the value of possible solutions."
"Discuss? Great! All I need to do is summarize the issues."
OTHER EXAMPLES OF MISINTERPRETATION

What you say...

• "Explain - "
  • "render understandable by making clear or plain; make known in detail"

• "Compare and Contrast - "
  • "look at/evaluate similarities and differences"

What they hear...

• "Summarize"l"

• "Summarize, twice"
THE PROBLEM IS NOT THAT TEACHERS OR STUDENTS DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT THE TERMS MEAN; THE FACT IS THAT THE TERMS HAVE NO FIXED MEANING AND CAN MEAN WHATEVER THE TEACHER EXPECTS THEM TO MEAN.

-White
RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT STUDENTS CONSTRUCT CONCEPTIONS ABOUT ACADEMIC WORK THAT DO NOT ALWAYS MATCH THOSE EXPECTED BY TEACHERS.

Deborah L. Butler (University of British Columbia) and Sylvie C. Cartier (Universite de Montreal)

from Promoting Effective Task Interpretation as an Important Work Habit: A Key to Successful Teaching and Learning
But Why?
THREE REASONS STUDENTS MISINTERPRET ASSIGNMENTS...

1. A lack of "metacognitive knowledge" regarding assignment expectations.
2. A lack of effective strategies for interpreting assignments.
3. A failure to actively seek understanding before starting an assignment.
“UNFORTUNATELY, SOMETIMES THE TASKS THAT STUDENTS ARE GIVEN IN SCHOOL INADVERTENTLY REINFORCE UNPRODUCTIVE TASK INTERPRETATIONS, WHICH THEN FEED INTO STUDENTS' CONSTRUCTION OF UNPRODUCTIVE METACOGNITIVE KNOWLEDGE OR MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TASKS, OR BOTH.”

Butler and Cartier
WHY STUDENTS MISINTERPRET ASSIGNMENTS

- Butler and Cartier provide primary and secondary school instruction as an example of how counter-productive learning habits are often established in school.
- In elementary and high school, students are often instructed to memorize facts for regurgitation on a test, with very little emphasis on the processing and analysis of the information.
- Upon entering college, these students are unprepared to analyze information critically.
WHY STUDENTS MISINTERPRET ASSIGNMENTS...

• Especially at American University, where the population is so diverse, students come to class from a variety of academic experiences.

• Quite often, those experiences may contribute to students' misconceptions regarding the objectives, criteria, and necessary actions involved in completing assignments.

• Many students require a reeducation in the interpretation and completion of assignments.
HOW CAN THE WRITING CENTER HELP?
INTERPRETING STUDENT CONCERNS IN THE WRITING CENTER

By Hanna Mangold, Writing Consultant, MFA 2016
WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

Total Appointments: 1098
• Undergraduate: 893
• CWP: 361
Out of these 1098 appointments, I pulled 157 in which the consultant specifically referenced issues with understanding the assignment.

From these 157, the students listed 254 total concerns (many students wrote multiple areas of interest) listed in 16 generalized categories.

72, or almost 1/3, of these 254 student concerns were about assignments.
**WHAT STUDENTS SAY**

- **Brainstorming** includes Ideas, Topics, Outlines, Getting Started
- **Taking a Position** includes Analysis, Focus, Voice, Content
- **Teacher's Comments** refers to understanding feedback, identifying strengths and weaknesses in paper
- **Revision** includes Editing and Proofreading (although all Writing Consultants inform students that the WC does not simply “fix” papers)
- **Grammar** includes Flow and specific topics
- **Not Confident** includes students seeking a second set of eyes
WHAT FALLS UNDER “ASSIGNMENT?”

“ASSIGNMENT” INCLUDES

- Understanding Assignment/Requirements
- Complying with Prompt/Rubric
- Making Sure All Points Are Made/Meets Professor Expectations

Specific notes refer to Literature Reviews, Annotated Bibliographies, Abstracts, Combining Narrative and Research, Transitioning/Incorporating Research.
WHAT WRITING CENTERS SEE

By Madison Chapman, Writing Consultant, BA 2015
Key role: Helping frustrated and confused students interpret assignments.

Consultants (especially as peers) have unique position directly in between professors and students.
**WRITING CENTER SCHOLARSHIP: ASSIGNMENTS**

AU’s Writing Center is not alone in consistently seeing students whose main concerns stem from assignment interpretation issues.

- “Understandably, students believe the purpose of all their writing is transactive: they expect the teacher to want information. As a result, they confuse the teacher’s desire for detail with a need for facts.”
  - Jane Bowman Smith
  Writing Center Director at Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina
  *Writing Center Journal*

- “While often misunderstood by students, the assignment sheet is an important text within the university. It’s important because it is written within the language of the academic discourse community... The writing prompt is a genre that complicates students’ rhetorical situations from which they compose.”
  - Anna Kendall
  Tutor at DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois
  *Writing Lab Newsletter*
“It is apparent that some students increasingly hate and fear the writing process itself...Teaching writing as a process is supposed to ease the student’s anxiety, but we have to be aware that the process can be pressed only so far before we bring about a situation of diminishing returns.”

-Virginia Downs (Writing Lab Newsletter)
CYCLE OF CONFUSION

• Student inability to interpret assignments can lead to a cycle of confusion and inadequate revisions. We see frustrated students sent by professors with their revisions of already revised papers because they are told that they do not understand the assignment.
Identify consistent problems with student assignment interpretation and offer suggested method of improvement for both professors and Writing Center staff members.

Dual perspective from both the instructive teaching side and also the Writing Center tutoring angle gives them a unique understanding of how writing consultants can compliment classroom work towards understanding assignments better.

* Political science professors, former Writing Center directors, currently oversee a graduate level Writing Center for political science students.
Rank & Pool created a set of guidelines for assignments, based on Bloom’s Taxonomy and adapted for university assignment strategy.

- “By receiving instruction on the expected *format* and *logic* of work in our discipline, students will be better equipped as both readers and writers of discipline-specific content.”

- “To help students understand how these goals are different, instructors perhaps should also provide definitions of the command terms for their students.”
KEY ISSUE: ASSIGNMENT WORDING

• Writing Centers are seeing students consistently fail to focus on meaning of command words.

• **Rank & Pool**: “the intent, structure, and wording of a prompt all help promote or impede student learning.”
Primary/Secondary Question Structure

- "Instructors often use a host of questions that seem to be clear and in order, but students frequently respond with paralysis. They come into a writing center asking: "Which of these questions should I answer? Do I answer all of them? Which is the main question?"

- Rank & Pool suggest professors work towards consistent assignment sheet structure: a central question to address the main point of the assignment and secondary questions that “…serve to direct [students’] focus to particular texts or concepts.”
HOW DO WRITING CENTERS ADDRESS WORDING ISSUES?

• **Engaging with Assignment Sheets**: We talk to students about identifying, physically underlining or highlighting command words.

• **Relational Knowledge**: Sometimes it is helpful to refer to past assignments if this project is linked to previous work for a class. Focus on identifying goal.

• **Open Communication Lines**: Prompt students to email or meet with professors to clarify/ask questions.
ASSIGNMENT SHEET CHALLENGES

• Inevitably, assignment sheet format and content will reflect expectations specific to disciplines. Wording changes/question structure may not always be flexible.

• Even with the right tools, students still may not “get it.” We see students who put up emotional barriers when they find an assignment, class or professor too intimidating or frustrating.
We urge: Continued Communication Efforts

Talk to us– and your students– about your goals for assignments!