



Seven Pitfalls in Writing Assignments

You too can write what your students will call an "Assignment from Hell.≡! Just follow these guidelines:¹

1. Intimidate with academic diction and exacting demands:

Carefully summarize and then faithfully represent and clearly articulate what is at the heart of the reading. You must provide logical links between ideas and responsibly use paraphrase and quotation. You are expected to be in control of your subject, not to pad with unnecessary words, and to display a mature understanding which synthesizes class work, lectures, and readings.

2. Stipulate no audience and/or purpose to help students define the context in which they are writing:

- Explore the complexities of an issue; develop and support your own perspective. Possible topics: 1) Bilingual education in the schools. (When funds are limited, should money go to bilingual education or to other language/support programs for other groups?) or 2) Affirmative action or reverse discrimination.

3. Create questions that are vague and assume knowledge students don't have:

Most recognize the necessary trade-offs in a democratic society between freedom of speech and government secrecy. Even the most ardent advocates of civil liberties recognize the need for secrecy in certain areas of governmental activities. Develop a framework for differentiating between public and classified information.

4. Overwhelm with concepts and questions, provoking incoherence:

Discuss one of the basic freedoms of our Constitution. The American people have traditionally expressed support for all of the basic freedoms, yet we are often non-supportive when it comes to specifics. For example, Americans state they are solidly for Freedom of Speech yet flinch at the idea of the Klu Klux Klan or the American Nazi Party being free to demonstrate and express their views. Your paper should trace the constitutional interpretation of one of the basic freedoms and list the important cases regarding this interpretation. To what degree has the public supported this interpretation? What political (or other) conflicts has this caused? State where you believe the Supreme Court should draw the line. Reinforce your argument with case data or other research. If you believe the right to be absolute, then so state and support it. The paper will be graded on the conciseness of your research and the cohesiveness of your argument.

¹ Based on a handout developed by Muriel Harris, Purdue University Writing Lab

5. Pit novice writers against professionals:

Read Ahren=s AThe Great American Football Ritual≅ and Cleaver's ABlood Lust.≅ Using these essays as models, choose and define an activity (such as a sporting event, the drive-in trend, courtship rituals) as a symbol of some aspect of American society. Make sure your essay reveals more than just something about the activity; it should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys that activity.

6. Emphasize mechanics and format over content:

A two-page assignment sheet: The first page and a half spell out requirements for page length, late penalties, documentation guidelines, and plagiarism warnings. The concluding paragraph on the second page contains the actual topic. Attached is a list of 65 rules of grammar to heed.

7. Ask for a broad discussion so students can't go beyond vague generalities:

Write a document analysis, of about 500 words, selected from one of the following documents from the Tierney and Scott volume: Thucydides; Plato, *Republic*; Aristotle, *Politics*; Augustine, *The Two Cities*. Put the document in historical content. Explain and interpret the significance of the document for its own time, and also relate any continuing significance of the document beyond its own time.

— — — —