and what the outcome of this work will be. Who will read it? For what purpose? Will you grade this writing? If they don’t know the answers to these questions in advance, they won’t know what they are doing.

A sense of safety results less from the kinds of activities in a class than from the students’ trust in you and in the behavior of other students in these activities. This trust is not just a warm, fuzzy sense of well-being. It results from confidence that you will establish and maintain rules that protect them from humiliation, conflict, and unnecessary confusion. If they have this confidence and a clear sense of what they are doing, students will participate freely in unfamiliar learning activities.

**Key Elements**

**Think of Assignments as Your Writing for the Course  30**

Essay assignments constitute one of the two most important kinds of writing we do for our students: the other is our written responses to their essays (the subject of the next chapter).

**The Rhetoric of Assignment Writing: Subject, Audience, Purpose, and Form  31**

Teaching writing can be a kind of research on the ways in which students learn the subject of your course. From this perspective, you can also think of writing assignments as research instruments: tools for finding out what students know, think, and believe on a given subject. To write effective assignments, therefore, you must take some basic rhetorical factors into account: the subject of a question, its purpose, the form of the response, and who the respondents are.

**Designing Assignments with Rhetorical Clarity  33**

For each assignment, the student should be able to answer these questions:

- What am I, the author, writing about?
- For whom?
- For what purpose?
- In what form?
Consider these rhetorical conditions for student writing:
- The primary conditions for student writing: you and your course.
- Imaginary or hypothetical conditions for student writing.
- Real audiences and purposes as conditions for student writing.

Defining Boundaries Clearly 38
Regardless of their rhetorical conditions, good assignments clearly define the boundaries within which students are free to write.

Sequencing Writing Assignments to Build a Course of Study 40
If you integrate writing with learning in your course design, writing assignments will not be isolated, disconnected occasions for writing practice; they will constitute a sequence that contributes to the overall shape and purpose of your course. What principles might govern an assignment sequence?
- Move from simple to complex tasks.
- Consider the order of writing activities in your field.
- Precede the theoretical/abstract with the experiential/concrete.
- Sequence assignments to build a frame of reference.
- Use repetition to measure progress.

Thinking of Assignments (and Courses) as Progressions 46
Thoughtfully designed and arranged in sequence, writing assignments have enormous potential to support directed movement through the learning process, as integral components of a course of study.

Think of Assignments as Your Writing for the Course
Essay assignments constitute one of the two most important kinds of writing we do for our students. The other is our written responses to their essays. Nevertheless, we often put far too little time into planning assignments and neglect to consider that what we write can dramatically affect how well our students will write in return. Whether we use assignments to help our students understand the material of a course, to evaluate their understanding, or to teach specific skills, assignments are the springboards that propel our students into action. What they do next will depend upon what we say. I ronically, instructors often get into trouble with writing assignments because they do not think of them as writing, let alone as important writing. While preparing these assignments, we don’t follow the advice we give our students: draft, revise, get someone else to read the text, and revise again. Instead, we tend to design assignments haphazardly. We may not write them out at all, relying on informal instructions given verbally at the end of class rather than giving students a carefully formulated text they can refer to. Teachers often write all of the course assignments quickly when they are composing a syllabus, without revising them when the term is under way, or invent each assignment as the need arises, shortly before class. We also tend to reproduce the kinds of assignments we had to complete as students, without recalling how tedious or confusing they might have been or why the good ones worked in contexts different from those of our classes.

When teachers produce an assignment quickly, without considering its strategic functions in the course, they rarely explain the purpose of the assignment to their students, often because they have not considered its purpose themselves. And if they do not think of the assignment as a piece of written communication they composed, they often blame their students for inconsistent and disappointing results.

The Rhetoric of Assignment Writing: Subject, Audience, Purpose, and Form
We proposed in Chapter 1 that you can profitably think of teaching writing as a kind of research on the ways in which students learn the subject of your course. From this perspective, you can also think of writing assignments as research instruments: tools for finding out what students know, think, and believe on a given subject. A questionnaire, like a writing assignment, is itself a form of writing, and social scientists know that even minor differences in the phrasing of a question can elicit very different answers from the same respondents. Ambiguous questions will yield ambiguous or inconsistent replies. Unfamiliar terms and concepts, or confusing instructions, will make a questionnaire difficult to complete and reduce the quality and proportion of returns. If people don’t understand why you asked a question, their answers will become wary and unreliable. Yet a good question should elicit an interesting range of comparable responses. Social research instruments work best when the respondents can easily understand the language and purposes of the questions and when those questions make enough sense in the context of their own experience to elicit genuine, thoughtful replies.

To write an effective questionnaire, therefore, social scientists have to take some basic rhetorical factors into account. They need to make clear:
- the subject of a question,
- its purpose, and
- the form of the response.
To do this they need to consider

- who the respondents are and
- what they are likely to understand.

Yet scholars who put this thought and care into their research often simply tell students to do something, without considering whether the terms, purpose, and form of the assignment are clear to its intended audience. In composing writing assignments, as in their other research, teachers also need to take rhetorical factors into account.

**Example of Rhetorical Context**

In an interdisciplinary teaching workshop, a historian passed around a draft of a writing assignment that presented a quotation from an assigned text and said, simply, “Discuss, in four pages.”

In a tone of deep suspicion, a biologist in the group asked, “What does discuss mean, exactly?”

The historian thought for a moment and said, “Well, I guess it means ‘Make an argument about what the quotation means.’” As he said this he had already realized that he needed to clarify the term discuss for his students, who were not necessarily history majors, and the discussion then turned to the meaning of the word argument.

For this historian, “make an argument” had a specific, complex meaning, on the order of “From your own perspective, situate this quotation in the context of the course, in relation to other interpretations of the same events.” But this conception of an argument differed from the kinds of arguments teachers might expect in political science, sociology, biology, or literary studies. While an argument in political science, for example, might be stated very directly as a thesis at the beginning of a paper and then supported by formal presentation of evidence and reasoning, historical arguments are often more subtly embedded in the way the writer narrates events and uses primary sources.

How could students in a history course make such complex inferences from the word discuss? A few of the most experienced history majors might understand what this teacher wanted them to do. The most bold or hopelessly confused students might ask for clarification. Other capable, responsible students might misinterpret the assignment and complete the wrong kind of paper. Like a faulty research instrument, such an assignment primarily tests the students’ abilities to figure out what the assignment really means, through trial and error. While “psyching out what the teacher really wants” may be a useful skill for undergraduates, it is probably not your main goal for an assignment or a very fair basis for evaluation.

In the following sections we cannot describe all of the specific features and functions that might help to make particular types of assign-

ments clear to students. Even in the case of arguments, there are too many variations among disciplines, levels of instruction, and specific course goals. Instead, we will explore the implications of this example in ways that encourage you to develop assignments that work, like good research questions, according to the goals of your own courses and disciplines.

**Designing Assignments with Rhetorical Clarity**

Because assignments are types of writing that elicit other types of writing, the rhetorical clarity you build into an assignment should help establish similar clarity for student writers.

On the basis of your assignment, students should be able to answer some basic questions about the subject, audience, purpose, and form of their work:

- What am I, the author, writing about?
- For whom?
- For what purpose?
- In what form?

If an assignment is clear, your students should know the answers to these questions — from the assignment itself or from the context of your course — as they begin work on the project. Clarifying these questions is especially important in undergraduate courses because the rhetorical features of student writing, compared with other kinds of written communication, can be rather murky. If you are writing an article for a particular journal, for example, you can answer these four questions quite easily. You have specific things you want to say about a topic, for readers of that journal, for reasons grounded in your career and discipline. The form and style of articles in that journal are either familiar to you or easy to determine by looking at back issues and guidelines for submissions. The rhetorical conditions for writing might be difficult, but they are not, as a rule, ambiguous.

**The Primary Conditions for Student Writing: You and Your Course**

By contrast, undergraduates typically write about subjects that are new to them, in forms that are unfamiliar. They also write primarily for their teachers, for the purpose of completing assignments and learning what they did not previously know. These are what we will call the primary conditions for student writing. Although we will describe further conditions for student writing — other audiences and purposes — these primary conditions always apply when we assign and evaluate writing in our courses.
Because our students are writing primarily to meet our expectations in the contexts of our classes, we are responsible for making those expectations as clear as possible.

- To what extent should we define the topic of the paper?
- What standards will we, as the primary audience, use to evaluate this work?
- What is the purpose of this assignment, in the context of the course?
- What form should the writing take?

We often presume that figuring out the answers to these questions is the writer's responsibility and that students will just know, somehow, what we want them to do. But ambiguous assignments create unnecessary frustration and confusion, and the resulting papers often represent lucky or unlucky guesswork, not the levels of knowledge, effort, and skill we want to assess.

For example, many assignments just pose a question, without any rhetorical context.

What is Steven Pinker's central argument in How the Mind Works, and who is he arguing against?

Most students will read this assignment essentially as an exam question and task of identification. They will assume that you have a particular Right Answer in mind and will devote much of their thought to figuring out what you want them to say. If you want instead for them to develop and explain their own interpretations, you need to make that expectation clear, as in the following examples. The first is a revised version of the cognitive psychology assignment on Stephen Pinker's work.

---

### Sample Assignments

In four pages, explain what you consider to be the most important argument in Steven Pinker's How the Mind Works, with examples and quotations that support your interpretation. There are several themes you might reasonably choose to emphasize. I want to know which one you consider the most important, and how well you can make your case.

Matthew Evangelista, a professor in government, made his expectations even more explicit in this assignment for a first-year writing seminar:

**Assignment:** Our in-class debate focused on the policy of the United States toward its NATO ally Turkey in light of that country's treatment of its ethnic Kurds. For this assignment, write the first draft of a short essay arguing against the position you side adopted in the debate. Bring the draft with you to class this Thursday, where a member of the opposing side will work with you on editing and revising it.

**Purpose:** This assignment is intended to help develop your skills in relating evidence to argument and considering counterarguments and evidence that does not support your own position. The peer-writing process should also enhance your skills in editing and revising.

For an upper-level seminar, Evangelista asked this question:

In order to sort out the most important factors and explanations for a particular phenomenon, political scientists sometimes employ "counterfactual history." To take a simple example, one might argue that if Roosevelt had lived longer or Stalin had died sooner, the cold war would never have happened. Try to find from among the readings an explicit or implicit counterfactual argument and analyze it. Consider, for example, the assumptions it makes about the most important level of analysis (in the case above, it would be the individual level — the "great person theory of history") and about the most important explanations for the cold war. The goal of the paper is to think critically about alternative courses that postwar Soviet-American relations might have taken as a way to understand the main factors that influenced the cold war.

The differences between these assignments reflect Evangelista's awareness of what he can reasonably expect students to do at different levels of study in his field: who his students are, what they already know, what they are likely to understand, and the kind of assignment they will be able to complete. Yet at both levels he clearly defines the subject, purpose, and form of the writing he wants students to produce.

---

### Imaginary or Hypothetical Conditions for Student Writing

In addition to these primary conditions for student writing, for you and your courses, there are often hypothetical conditions that can make assignments more explicit, meaningful, and interesting. Because you create these occasions for writing, you are free to modify and specify the rhetorical conditions you want students to imagine as they write. In fact, most assignments have implicitly imaginary, hypothetical features. When you assign a "paper" or an "essay" in your course, you are actually looking, perhaps, for a particular kind of argument, analysis, explanation, or report, rooted in your discipline. As David Bartholomae observes, you are asking students to write as though they were professional literary scholars, historians, political scientists, or developmental psychologists: to approximate that kind of knowledge and authority, that kind of position and perspective.
Remember that if you have a particular form of writing in mind, you should explain what that form is, or show students examples. You can’t reasonably expect them to invent forms you haven’t described. You can also ask students explicitly to pretend that they are other kinds of writers, writing for imaginary audiences, in forms appropriate for those imagined contexts.

We know teachers who have asked their students to imagine that they were writing articles for particular periodicals, such as Scientific American or Psychology Today, or letters on specific issues to the editors of particular newspapers. Other teachers have asked students to imagine that they were political or scientific advisers to presidents or senators or that they were consultants assigned to recommend, in the form of a memo or a report, reorganization strategies for a particular corporation. Undergraduates usually enjoy this explicitly playful adoption of personae, and because imitation is a natural, powerful way to learn language, they are surprisingly good at adopting imaginary voices and styles.

**Sample Assignment**

In his course on the history and literature of Islamic Spain, Ross Brann gave his students a choice between two similar assignments. One assumed primary rhetorical conditions, asking them to describe a type of historical figure, in a conventional academic essay. The other applied hypothetical rhetorical conditions, asking them to imagine that they were that figure, writing in a form and style characteristic of the period:

1. Draw a portrait of an Andalusian *adib* (literary intellectual). What must such a person know and how must he behave? Describe how this *adib* served Andalusian courtly society, what his life was like, his view of the world, what kinds of poetry he preferred and wrote, and why he preferred them.

2. Imagine that you are an Andalusian *adib* living in tenth-century Córdoba. Write a letter to a like-minded friend in North Africa (or Barcelona) and describe your life so as to convince him to join you at the Umayyad court. Also tell him something about your favorite genre of poetry and what you have been hearing and writing lately.

The great majority of Brann’s students chose the second option and wrote with remarkably lively historical and literary imagination. Adopting this unlikely persona seemed more interesting and enjoyable to them, if not easier, than pretending they were academic authorities on Islamic Spain.

**Real Audiences and Purposes as Conditions for Student Writing**

We should also recognize that student writing does not have to be a hypothetical exercise, performed exclusively for teachers to demonstrate the potential to communicate with others. Students can actually write for other audiences, including one another, for purposes that extend beyond the completion of course requirements.

From his interviews with Harvard seniors (summarized in the book *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*), Richard Light identified three major factors that made writing and writing instruction most effective for these students:

- “They believe they learn most effectively when writing instruction is organized around a substantive discipline” rather than used to teach abstract, general skills (59).  
- They learned most from teachers who invited and respected diverse interpretations and were most frustrated when “the teacher seems to forget whose paper it is, and begins to change the voice of an essay from the student’s voice to the teacher’s voice” (60).  
- “Students identify the courses that had the most profound impact on them as courses in which they wrote papers, not just for the professor, as usual, but for their fellow students as well” (64).

The first observation supports our recommendation in the previous chapter that writing should be integrated as much as possible with learning in the course and discipline. The second recommends assignments and responses that explicitly encourage independent thinking and motivation for writing. The third point suggests that assignments and the broader contexts of the course should create real occasions for students to read and respond to one another’s work. In the following chapters we will suggest a variety of methods for organizing this exchange and making students real audiences for student writing.

Readers beyond the classroom can also become real, primary audiences, for purposes important to larger communities. Letters to the editors of newspapers can be sent and are sometimes published. Letters to political and community leaders and agencies can also be sent to those intended readers, and so can some kinds of research papers and reports of relevance to particular organizations.

**Sample Assignment**

In his writing-intensive section of an evolutionary biology course, Cornell graduate student Brian Tow gave the following assignment:

Write a letter to the Kansas Board of Education in favor of the reinstatement of evolution as a topic that should be covered in high
school biology. At least part of your letter should be devoted to the question of what is fact versus theory with respect to evolution.

At the time, the fall of 1999, this was an important national issue in science education, and along with other background information and discussion, Traw’s assignment included a copy of a *New York Times* article, “Board for Kansas Deletes Evolution from Curriculum.” This assignment allowed biology majors to participate directly in a national debate of great relevance to education in their field.

Defining Boundaries Clearly

Regardless of the rhetorical conditions you build into them, good assignments clearly define the boundaries within which students are free to write. This premise acknowledges that if writing is to be anything more than copying or following instructions, writers must have some freedom to take positions, develop ideas, and choose language that communicates what they have to say. However, freedom becomes meaningful and constructive only within boundaries, and unclear boundaries—even very broad ones—tend to restrict freedom by making every move seem potentially a wrong move.

Clear boundaries for writing can be very broadly or narrowly focused, loosely or tightly structured, with lots of room or very little room for choices. You might give students freedom to write about any theme that interests them in an assigned reading, or you might ask them to answer a very specific question about a single quotation. We’ve found that students are about evenly divided in their preferences for open or tightly structured assignments, so you won’t be able to please everyone unless you offer a choice of assignment types. Whether they like the scope of the assignment or not, however, students should know clearly where your role as the teacher ends and where their roles, choices, and responsibilities as writers begin.

Counterproductive Clarifications

Lack of clarity sometimes results from omission, but teachers often obscure the boundaries of an assignment by offering suggestions, hints, examples, and “clarifications” that imply a hidden agenda and thus qualify the freedom they have previously defined. When they have defined the general boundaries of the assignment, teachers often qualify these boundaries with signal phrases such as the following:

You might want to consider . . .

For example, on page 25 Bloom states . . .

While you are writing, you might want to keep the following questions in mind:

When you are tempted to add “clarifications” to an assignment, you might keep the following warnings in mind:

- When you find yourself adding helpful suggestions, remember that students will almost invariably read might to mean should.
- Students will also tend (despite your injunctions to the contrary) to interpret examples as prescriptions: indications of what you really want them to do but aren’t saying outright.
- If you include lists of examples, questions, or points they “might” find useful, student writers will also tend to use these sequences as organizational guidelines. When you read their papers, you will find that suggestions you listed at random, as they happened to occur to you, will appear in the same order, as though you had prescribed a logical sequence for writing and thinking about the topic.

The truth of the matter, in most cases, is that we continue to think about the boundaries of the assignment while we are writing it, and those qualifications represent second, further thoughts as we begin to envision the kind of paper we hope students will produce. So we add those further thoughts in a casual, offhand manner that students will not take casually at all—and for good reason. These apparently random suggestions often do offer clues to the real expectations with which we will read papers, even if we haven’t fully realized those expectations ourselves.

The solution to this problem is either to stop yourself when you begin to offer “hints” or to revise the assignment in ways that build these hints into redefined boundaries. If you make the first decision, when you read the papers you must honor the freedom you have given students and not hold them accountable for unstated expectations. If you take the second option, you should state very clearly the questions you want students to consider or the approach they should take as guidelines for writing.
Sequencing Writing Assignments to Build a Course of Study

Thus far we’ve discussed the qualities and functions of individual writing assignments. If you integrate writing with learning in your course design, however, these assignments will not be isolated, disconnected occasions for writing practice; they will constitute a sequence that contributes to the overall shape and purpose of your course. Like writing itself, courses usually have a narrative quality of movement that carries students from one level of knowledge and understanding to another. If you think of the beginning of your course as a point of departure in this learning process, assignment sequences should help carry students through this process toward a particular destination.

The revision of course designs, in turn, includes the revision of assignments and sequences to create a more effective progression. When individual writing assignments do not work, the reason is not necessarily that they are bad assignments. Teachers often realize instead that an assignment worked poorly because it called for knowledge and skills the students did not yet possess or was in other ways misplaced in the sequence.

What principles should govern this developmental sequence? Particular subjects, levels, teaching goals, and disciplines affect sequences so heavily that the specific answers to this question are almost as numerous as listings in the course catalog. But there are some general principles you can probably apply to your course, if you identify the progression of learning goals in the course and then consider the ways in which specific types of writing correlate with those goals.

Sequencing Assignments: Moving from Simple to Complex Tasks

This would seem to be an obvious principle, but we have observed many course plans that immediately ask students to write the kinds of papers they might be able to complete well only at the end of the term, such as complex analyses or comparisons of very difficult, theoretical texts. Asking a student who has read only one text in a field to critique its strengths and weaknesses may be asking for the impossible. When students can’t meet these high expectations, teachers often have to revise their plans with a sense of disappointment that undermines morale.

WHAT MAKES AN ASSIGNMENT SIMPLE? There are a number of features other than brevity that can make assignments relatively simple in a sequence:

- Writing short papers before writing longer ones.
- Writing about one reading selection before comparing or synthesizing two or more readings.
- Explaining a basic concept before applying that concept to new problems or cases.
- Summarizing a text before analyzing, interpreting, or criticizing a text.
- Explaining one author’s argument before developing one’s own argument on the issue.

We will amplify these and other bases for sequences in following sections.

Sequencing Assignments: Consider the Order of Writing Activities in Your Field

To begin a sequence with a relatively simple assignment, you do not need to start beneath the level of serious work in your course. In most fields of study, simple writing tasks are embedded in complex ones, within the whole process of assembling and communicating knowledge, and these embedded forms often constitute a developmental sequence.

WRITING SUMMARIES In fields in which students usually write about texts, the task of summarizing a text is not just a separate, rudimentary form of writing and is not necessarily easy. Summary is an essen-
tial part of interpretation, comparison, critical analysis, and other complex kinds of writing. In fact, many flawed arguments and interpretations result from misunderstanding or misrepresentation of what the author actually said. Critical essays often begin with a clear summary to convince readers that the criticism is fair.

Summaries themselves can take different forms, used to cultivate particular skills:

- **Sequential gloss or “plot summary”**
- **An account of the author’s central argument and evidence**
- **Identification of the underlying assumptions used to build an argument**
- **Description of the structure or organization of the text**

**Working with Basic Terms and Concepts** Some fields in the humanities — such as film, theater, and the history of art — require knowledge of basic terms and concepts used in interpretive and critical writing. It makes sense to design early assignments that develop mastery of these linguistic and conceptual foundations.

### Sample Assignments

Lynda Bogel, who teaches first-year writing seminars on the study of film, finds it useful in one of her first essay assignments to give students a well-defined, simple task that calls on their study of specifics (such as props, symbols, lighting) and modes of interpretation. She asks them to choose an assertion to refute, giving consideration to counterarguments. For example, students might tackle this assertion about the film *Thelma and Louise*:

> There’s a lot of pointless, filler scenery in *Thelma and Louise* — endless vistas, vast expanses of open deserts and canyons, unpolluted blue skies, secondary roads stuffed with horns, oil derricks, sirens, Mack trucks (you even get trucks filled with blue skies). In a film about a growing friendship between two women on the run, all these settings seem a meaningless way to extend the film’s length.

In another early, fairly simple assignment, Bogel asks students to apply basic terms and concepts in film studies to the analysis of a single scene:

Choose one of the following scenes from *Psycho* to analyze in detail, considering the way the various aspects of the scene (cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, soundtrack, etc.) contribute to its overall effect.

- The real estate office scene
- Marion driving her car
- The shower sequence (including Norman “cleaning up”)
- Lila exploring the Bates house
- The psychiatrist’s “explanation”

### Observation and Description

In courses that involve field studies or laboratory research, observation and description naturally precede, and then become part of, the presentation and analysis of data in full reports. Rather than assigning full reports first, many teachers initially focus on field and lab notes, then on the development of hypotheses and methods, before asking students to write introductions, discussion sections, and abstracts. Full reports or research proposals therefore emerge from the kinds of writing and thinking that, in professional studies, lead to them. As we will observe in Chapter 7, library research papers also result from a series of writing and reading activities that can be usefully assigned in sequence.

For these reasons, you might think of “simple” assignments as “prior tasks.”

### Sequencing Assignments: Precede the Theoretical/Abstract with the Experiential/Concrete

As a rule, students have considerable difficulty grasping theories, abstract concepts, and associated readings without prior attention to cases, concrete examples, or connection with personal experience. Many of the “prior tasks” we have mentioned, such as field and laboratory notes, are also forms of writing based on direct experience and hands-on learning.

In science classes, students can usually grasp general, abstract concepts more easily if they first attempt to explain concrete examples. In an anthropology course on the ritual process, students might begin by describing specific rituals from their own experience, such as weddings or fraternity initiations, before they read descriptions and theoretical accounts of rituals in other cultures. A course on the history or political theory of women’s work might initially ask students to outline work histories of women in their families over three generations and then describe the changes they observe over time. In the social sciences, students can better understand theories if they first examine detailed cases that situate theoretical positions in people’s lives. Literature courses often begin by asking students to connect events and themes in a work of literature with dimensions of their own experience.

### Sample Assignment

In a first-year writing seminar on women and space, Antonia losano, at the time a graduate student in English at Cornell, used a series of short essays to prepare her students for a longer, more abstract discussion of gender and space in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One’s Own*. In an opening essay students wrote a description of a special space at Cornell that they had explored for this purpose; another essay then asked them to theorize, as a sociologist, feminist, or cultural critic, their experience of one day’s activities at Cornell. Several increasingly complex assignments followed. By the time they wrote on Woolf, they were well prepared to take a sophisticated approach.
Sequencing Assignments: Sequence Assignments to Build a Frame of Reference

It’s at least daunting, if not unreasonable, to ask students to write as though they were authorities when they are not — to take positions on an issue, for example, when they have no basis for forming a position. The problem is aggravated by the fact that American students, especially, are often accustomed to making flimsy arguments — pulled out of a hat as “personal opinion” — on complex issues they know little about. In their secondary schools, most undergraduates were asked to take positions on issues such as capital punishment and abortion in short essays, with little reference to the vast arenas of national debate. If you assign such arguments prematurely, therefore, the problem is that your students will complete the assignments as opinion pieces. And you will have to figure out what to do next. If one of your goals is to teach your students how to develop a substantial argument, it makes sense for you to delay this kind of assignment — even to prohibit students from taking a position — until they have a solid basis for developing and supporting one with explicit assumptions, sufficient evidence, and acknowledgment of differing views.

| Sample Assignments |

For the purpose of delaying students’ taking a position, you can use earlier assignments to build the frame of reference from which positions emerge and become meaningful. Summaries and comparisons of central arguments in assigned readings, annotated bibliographies, and library research exercises can be useful ways to build this frame of reference.

You can also begin by asking students to adopt the viewpoints — or even the voices — of authors they read. Like many other teachers, sociologist Michael Macy has recognized that his students have difficulty applying theories to cases with critical awareness of the degree of “fit” between them. Students have this difficulty in part because they do not have a point of view from which they can recognize the usefulness and limitations of theory. To help them establish this position in his course Group Solidarity, Macy asks students to analyze a specific case initially from the viewpoint of a particular theorist and then from the viewpoint of another theorist, so they can register the effects of differing perspectives. When they have grasped what it means to have a well-defined theoretical position for analyzing cases, he asks them in the culminating assignment to test the predictions of a single theory with reference to two related case studies. They cannot do this, Macy has found, until they realize from earlier assignments that social theories offer ways of understanding cases from particular positions — points of view — juxtaposed to others.
Thinking of Assignments (and Courses) as Progressions

Our discussion of assignments and sequences in this chapter suggests some correlations between good courses and good writing, both of which embody principles of structure and movement.

In both cases these qualities of structure and movement are interdependent but represent different kinds of order, one categorical and the other sequential. In other words, we can think of a course or an essay categorically as a topic broken into subtopics, as in a conventional syllabus or outline. We can also think of a course or an essay as a progression: a connected series of ideas and information that moves us from one position or level of understanding to another.

The term *course* itself (as used in navigation) suggests this quality of movement in a direction, from one place to another, and the root meanings of *essay* — to try out or test something (in Latin and French) — suggest exploration and experimentation.

We have emphasized consideration of sequence, progression, and connection not because topical structure is unimportant, but because the means of progression tend more to be neglected. When teachers plan courses, as we noted in Chapter 1, they usually begin with decisions about the range of topics they will cover, and while they arrange these topics in a logical sequence, their plans do not always extend to ways of moving students through a process of learning. As a representation of topical structure, a course syllabus usually looks skeletal, without the life and flesh necessary for movement.

When teachers continue to think of their courses as topical structures, they also tend to think of writing assignments in relation to topics covered at particular times: “This week students will write about Topic A; next week we will turn to Topic B.” This correlation of assignments with course topics is obviously necessary, but it does not take into account the process through which students develop knowledge and skills as learners of this material and as writers in a discipline.

Thoughtfully designed and arranged in sequence, writing assignments have enormous potential to support directed movement through the learning process, as integral components of a course of study.

---

**Key Elements**

**The Silent Transaction** 48

In preparation for reading, responding to, and evaluating student writing, pause to consider what you are about to do and why, along with some potential alternatives.

**An Approach to Avoid: Reading Student Writing with Grading as a Goal** 49

The proper place for grading is at the end of the process of reading and responding to student papers, not at the beginning. The process should begin with reading. Be wary of becoming one of three types of graders: the grading machine, the instructive grader, the copy editor.

**What Students Prefer** 53

Students value thoughtful feedback that engages them in dialogue with their teachers. They see this feedback as an essential part of the writing process and as a foundation for their development. You cannot expect good writing to matter to them if it does not appear to count in your approach to response.