This bibliography offers detailed summaries of five articles (published between 1983 and 1993) that provide practical and theoretical advice on designing writing assignments that can serve as more than just evaluation tools. The articles summarized in the bibliography confirm common sense but also dispel some common misconceptions about student writing and the effectiveness of writing assignments. The first article in the bibliography describes the cognitive development of college students and lays the groundwork for some of the assertions in the next four articles. The second article addresses the goals of good writing assignments and pinpoints strategies which ensure that students do not misread those goals. The third and fourth articles give strategies for constructing a good assignment and suggest types of assignments that foster critical thinking, while the fifth article concentrates on the idea of sequencing assignments and gives an example of a sequence based on a central theme. (NKA)
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1. As knowers, students exhibit polarized, right-wrong thinking. They mistake their personal views for "truth," believe knowledge is factual information, expect to learn by absorbing "truth" from authorities (teachers, textbooks) and by accumulating facts, lack tolerance for ambiguity and qualified language, and lack standards for judging what is important. They tend to read for facts instead of meaning. These attitudes can lead to such questions as "Will this be on the exam?" "How many pages of reading are required for this paper?" and "What does the teacher want?"
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1. As knowers, these students believe that although all answers aren't known, they will be known eventually. Where answers aren't known, different views are mere "opinions" that are equally good or bad. In other words, students see no way to distinguish between opinions and supported positions. Some may assert themselves ("I have a right to my opinion") while others may diminish themselves ("It's just my opinion"), but both groups tend to perceive truth and values as arbitrary.
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1. As knowers, these students realize that many views exist, but that some are more valid and can be justified more convicingly. They can develop criteria (quality of reasoning, credibility of evidence, and internal consistency) for judging ideas. They recognize that people have reasons for their differences that are grounded in different assumptions, contexts, knowledge, emphasis, and weighting of evidence. They are beginning to understand that knowledge structures are provisional, and that while authorities don't have the ultimate truth, they do have experience and have thought deeply about the topic. They may also begin to see that different disciplines have different procedures for analyzing, categorizing, and synthesizing information.
2. As writers, these students can recognize the needs of an audience and write for it effectively. They can anticipate objections to their arguments, represent opposing views sympathetically, and critically examine their own conclusions. Their tone is reasonable and rational, and they use qualified language to indicate degrees of conviction.

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1. As knowers, such students recognize that knowledge is inherently indeterminate, value-laden, and constructed by fallible humans who are trying hard to be objective and rational. They perceive that experts search for understanding and try to make reasonable judgments along the way. Such people are willing to make choices and commitments based on analysis, judgment, and acknowledged values.
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1. Perspective I writing tasks might include summarizing, outlining, or listing; Perspective II tasks can introduce the pluralism of ideas and use disagreements between authorities to force students to acknowledge and deal with different views; Perspective III tasks should include argument—the supporting of claims by reasoning and evidence—and students should make use of the discipline's analytical processes, tools, and criteria; Perspective IV tasks should require students to look at the underlying values that serve as a basis for choosing among alternative arguments.

2. Because any class will have students with a mixture of cognitive skills, any writing assignment should contain subtasks that can be done by Perspective I students in addition to tasks that push them toward higher perspectives.

3. Any sequence of writing assignments or any assignment that is broken down into steps affords an opportunity to improve the students' cognitive skills by sequencing tasks from simple to complex and by allowing an instructor to give students feedback so that they can refine their skills.

4. A writing assignment that includes some form of collaboration among students (collaborative planning, peer-group response to drafts, collaborative writing) helps them move out of Perspective I by forcing them to acknowledge different points of view and to rely less on authorities. Collaboration allows less advanced students to observe and learn from those with better developed cognitive skills, and it allows able students to refine their skills for a real audience.


Writing assignments often present students with a set of complex demands, decision-making opportunities, and unspecified assumptions. By making their expectations clearer, instructors give students a greater chance to succeed and learn from assignments.

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Reiff and Middleton suggest that instructors set up writing tasks that include some private and unevaluated writing, that allow students to generate information that might even be new to the instructor, and that give students real or realistic audiences to write for; this writing should be evaluated in terms of the students' discovery and communication.
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Even if an instructor doesn't make all of these goals and elements of writing assignments explicit, students must address them, either consciously or unconsciously, sometimes with results that the instructor finds surprising and puzzling. In designing a sequence of assignments, the instructor can begin by tightly structuring initial assignments so that students can see all the required elements and the freedoms and constraints they impose. Later assignments can then allow students to make choices, perhaps about audience or criteria or subject matter.


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They suggest three practical strategies for designing effective writing assignments:
1. "Tying the assignment to your course objectives" (2). The instructor can make a list of what her objectives are for the course and what the students are expected to learn. Each assignment should be designed to accomplish one or more of those goals.
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1. Assign writing that doesn’t just test students’ knowledge but helps them learn.
2. Get a colleague to read the assignment handout for clarity.
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1. They include a step-wise, orderly sequence that develops skills.
2. The skills start at a low level and move toward increasing complexity, e.g., summarizing, recognizing basic issues, identifying key concepts, recognizing assumptions, asking appropriate questions, creating arguments, critiquing arguments.
3. The sequencing leads to more and shorter assignments, some of which can be done during class time.
4. The assignments focus on real problems and issues, starting with the concrete and personal and moving to the more detached and abstract. For example, instead of asking students to "distinguish the relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of anguish and freedom" (73), ask them instead to apply Sartre's concepts to the situation of a friend who is in deep despair over a failed relationship.
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Myers suggests five types of written assignments that can be worked into this sequence:

1. Brief summaries that ask for more than just condensing and paraphrasing and that require identifying, processing, and ranking important concepts and issues. Students could be asked to summarize an assigned reading, a lecture or classroom presentation, a discussion, or a videotape.

2. Short analytical papers where the later ones build on the skills developed in earlier ones.

3. Problem-solving exercises using popular media (e.g., newspaper reports, editorials, advertisements). Students can be asked to apply principles being discussed in the course to these materials. For example, if the class is studying free market competition, an article that addresses "the farm problem" could be summarized, its author's interpretation compared with the model being discussed in class, and its conclusions critiqued.

4. Structured projects that involve observation or interviews, require a minimum of props or expertise, and can be completed in a short time.

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Myers recognizes the problems with workload that more assignments create, but he points out that the pile of papers on each due date is smaller because individual assignments are shorter. The sequencing of assignments will do a much better job of building skills than the traditional term paper, and students can learn from the immediate feedback that follows each of their efforts.


Often, writing assignments are designed as if they exist in a vacuum. However, Pytlik advocates the sequencing of writing assignments around a theme so that students can benefit from writing about a series of related subjects.

The sequencing of assignments has several goals:

1. To "move students beyond personal knowledge and personal responses to shared values and traditions" (74).
2. To develop cognitive skills and critical thinking skills.
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4. To "help students see writing as a means of knowing and a means of coming to know" (74).
5. To "prepare students for writing in their professions and for academic writing" (75).

Writing assignments can incorporate any or all of the following kinds of sequencing:

1. The assignments can move linearly, from easiest to hardest, in both cognitive and rhetorical terms.
2. Each assignment in the sequence can have a subset of tasks that help the students through that assignment.
3. The sequence can be recursive so that each assignment demands that students either use and expand strategies already practiced in a previous assignment or reevaluate content generated in a previous assignment, or both.

Pytlik then gives an example of a sequenced writing assignment based on the theme of the family, specifically asking "What is a family?" and "How is family a political issue?" (77). The assignments move through the following sequence:
1. A personal essay answering the first question.
2. A personal account of a family-related event.
3. A ghost-written account of the previous assignment of another student in the class.
   This assignment calls for some distancing from the subject and some interviewing of
   the student who wrote the original version.
4. A summary of a periodical article on some aspect of family.
5. An essay based on a thesis about a family relationship in one of the readings for the
   class.
6. An exploratory essay (one that "does not come to a conclusion and is not, therefore,
   thesis-driven" (80)) on what it means when a political program (left or right) claims to
   be pro-family. The essay should begin with an illustrative anecdote and its
   implications and then follow the question wherever it leads.
7. A proposal that defines a problem, identifies its causes, identifies an audience capable
   of acting on the problem, and proposes and discusses a solution.
8. A final in-class paper that asks the first question over again.

Although this chapter is written primarily for composition teachers, the sequence model can
be used in whole or in part and can be adapted to a variety of themes and courses. Pytlik
offers a heuristic to help in designing such a sequence:
1. What is a topic about which your students share knowledge and on which they are
   able to find information from a variety of sources?
2. What skills do you want them to practice during the quarter? Summarizing?
   search?
4. What basic question do you want them to answer as the driving force behind all the
   assignments, yielding, on the last assignment, a rhetorically and cognitively complex
   paper?
5. How should the assignments be arranged? According to difficulty of assessing the
   audience? According to the complexity of cognitive skills required?
6. What in-class and out-of-class activities will be required to connect and complete the
   sequence?
A Brief Annotated Bibliography:
Designing Writing Assignments that Foster Critical Thinking

Jared Haynes
Campus Writing Center
Department of English
University of California
Davis, CA 95616

This bibliography summarizes five articles that offer practical and theoretical advice on designing writing assignments that will serve as more than just evaluation tools. Much of the research confirms common sense, but it also dispels some common misconceptions about student writing and the effectiveness of writing assignments. The first piece describes the cognitive development of college students and lays the groundwork for some of the assertions in the following articles. The second article addresses the goals of good writing assignments and strategies to ensure that students don't misread those goals. The third and fourth articles give strategies for constructing a good assignment and suggest types of assignments that foster critical thinking. The fifth one concentrates on the idea of sequencing assignments and gives an example of a sequence based on a central theme.


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3. The sequence can be recursive so that each assignment demands that students either use and expand strategies already practiced in a previous assignment or reevaluate content generated in a previous assignment, or both.

Pytlik then gives an example of a sequenced writing assignment based on the theme of the family, specifically asking "What is a family?" and "How is family a political issue?" (77). The assignments move through the following sequence:
1. A personal essay answering the first question.
2. A personal account of a family-related event.
3. A ghost-written account of the previous assignment of another student in the class. This assignment calls for some distancing from the subject and some interviewing of the student who wrote the original version.
4. A summary of a periodical article on some aspect of family.
5. An essay based on a thesis about a family relationship in one of the readings for the class.
6. An exploratory essay (one that "does not come to a conclusion and is not, therefore, thesis-driven" (80)) on what it means when a political program (left or right) claims to be pro-family. The essay should begin with an illustrative anecdote and its implications and then follow the question wherever it leads.
7. A proposal that defines a problem, identifies its causes, identifies an audience capable of acting on the problem, and proposes and discusses a solution.
8. A final in-class paper that asks the first question over again.

Although this chapter is written primarily for composition teachers, the sequence model can be used in whole or in part and can be adapted to a variety of themes and courses. Pytlik offers a heuristic to help in designing such a sequence:

1. What is a topic about which your students share knowledge and on which they are able to find information from a variety of sources?
3. What information-gathering techniques should they practice? Interviewing? Library search?
4. What basic question do you want them to answer as the driving force behind all the assignments, yielding, on the last assignment, a rhetorically and cognitively complex paper?
5. How should the assignments be arranged? According to difficulty of assessing the audience? According to the complexity of cognitive skills required?
6. What in-class and out-of-class activities will be required to connect and complete the sequence?