

Covering All the Bases: Addressing the Multiple Concerns of the College Writer

Levi Castello, Plymouth State College

As an English major in a teacher certification program, I am very interested in how different writing assignments and my approaches to them have affected my learning experience. While I realize that much of what a writer takes away from a writing assignment is a direct result of what he or she puts into it, I have found that certain kinds of writing assignments tend to result in more positive writing and learning experiences than others. The most common complaint voiced in the college level writing intensive classes I have taken has been that assignments are too directive, stifling the creativity of the students and making the writing process less interesting and stimulating for the writer. Although many students, including myself, often resent being forced to write in a very specific way, completely open-ended assignments can be just as troublesome. While I appreciate and enjoy being allowed to select my own topic or direction, I have found that being given complete freedom with an assignment can often be unsettling.

Learning the art of academic writing was a unique experience for me. Through elementary and middle school, I attended a private school where the administration took as much pride in the students' standardized test scores as they did in the school's immaculately groomed grounds and gardens. From second grade on, we went to test preparation class three days a week, more than art and music combined. We were taught to see through trick questions, spot the dummy answers in multiple-choice line-ups, and make educated guesses with an accuracy that would put Dionne Warwick's psychic friends to shame. Since the primary goal of the school's program was maximizing the students' assessment scores, our teachers took this same utilitarian approach when teaching writing. Our first lessons were in assignment analysis. After all, to get the best grade possible, you first had to figure out what kind of paper your grader wanted you to write. We were drilled on the meanings of words like *compare*, *contrast*,

summarize, argue, and discuss.

Our supreme goal was to identify and address the spirit of an assignment. To hone our skills as assignment fulfillers, we were given essay questions on subjects we knew absolutely nothing about so that we could practice constructing coherent and persuasive arguments unfettered by the constraints of reality or specific content knowledge. Our teachers trained us to get high grades and follow the guidelines of standard academic formats. They taught us that students who don't know what they are saying, but say it so well that no one notices, will invariably get a better grade than students who understand the concepts being tested, but falter in relating that information to the reader.

During summers, I discovered the joys of writing for the sake of writing. I enjoyed my personal writing but saw it as unconnected to my academic writing. The stories and poetry in my personal journals had nothing in common with my class work mainly because they were written out of inspiration rather than direct instruction. I never had a chance to apply what I had learned about my own voice as a writer to the papers I was assigned in class.

This remained much the same until I moved on to one of the most profoundly different environments imaginable, public high school. Here I began to see writing assignments as creative opportunities. I had an opportunity to take some outstanding English courses where my teachers were more interested in nurturing my creativity than my ability to answer essay questions. By the end of high school, writing had become one of my favorite artistic and academic pursuits.

During my first year of college level writing at a very conservative institution, my Composition instructor gave us this assignment:

Write a five paragraph argumentative essay supporting the thesis: "The removal of prayer and other expressions of faith from the public school system has contributed to the recent rise in school violence and juvenile delinquency." Your points should include the importance of faith in dealing with the stresses of adolescence, young people's need for spiritual guidance from as many role models as possible, and the negative effects of a secular upbringing. Your essay should be between 500 and 750 words long. The total word count of your paper should be written at the top right hand corner of the title page. Papers longer or shorter than the prescribed length will not be accepted.

Although this assignment did allow me to concentrate almost exclu-

sively on the focus, clarity, direction, and overall quality of my essay, I thoroughly detested writing it. Knowing that my essay would say nearly the same thing as every other student's paper, but unwilling to sacrifice my grade to make an artistic statement, I wrote a lovely little conformist essay that said exactly what my instructor wanted it to. I got my paper back with an "A" scrawled in red ink on the upper left corner of the title page and promptly threw it in the trash bin in the hallway outside the classroom.

While this is obviously a worst-case scenario for the free thinkers that generally populate writing classes, it does illustrate their fears. With an assignment like this, a writer either does or does not follow directions. The only area in which the student can express his or her creativity or skill as a writer, and still achieve a good grade, is in the language of the text itself.

In a very different writing course here at Plymouth State College, my instructor asked the class to, "Write five pages or so about whatever you want and bring them in next Monday." At first I was elated. I viewed this as a challenging, but enjoyable writing assignment. I was going to be judged solely on my own merit. My paper would reflect my thought, creativity, and ability as a writer. Then I started to wonder about how exactly my writing was going to be judged. This was a graded assignment after all, and I had no idea what my instructor was looking for. I found it liberating to be free to take my paper in any direction I wanted. But at the same time, I was unsettled by the fact that I had no point of reference in determining which directions might be better than others. After second-guessing nearly every decision I made about the assignment, I was left with no choice but to forget about the fact that this was a graded assignment and write for the sake of writing.

The resulting piece was a short story that I liked; however, I could only hope my instructor would feel the same way. When I turned the paper in I was very nervous about how it would be graded. In the end, I was pleased with my grade, but I had very little idea of what criteria it was based on. My grade did make me feel better about an assignment that had caused me considerable stress, but it didn't show me how this paper was evaluated. My vague hope that my instructor liked the same things I did about my story was hardly reassuring or helpful when it came time to write for him again.

In yet another writing class, I encountered the following assignment:

Using what we have learned about the historical and political background of this piece, write a five-page paper analyzing the political intentions and motivations of any of the main characters or even the author. Any assertions you make should be supported by specific examples from the text.

Even though this assignment does have some specific directions I had no problems completing it. The assignment informed me of what my instructor was looking for and what my grade would be based on while still allowing me to write a paper that expressed my own ideas and reading of the text. Secure in my knowledge of what elements my paper should include, I went on to write a paper that challenged me but did not cause the kind of undue stress and uncertainty that the first two assignments did. This assignment yielded both a positive writing experience and a result that I was proud of.

While the first two assignments represent extreme ends of the spectrum, I had the same basic problem in completing both of them. As a student writer, I am concerned both with expressing myself creatively and achieving the approval of my instructor, usually in the form of a grade.

The first assignment exclusively addressed my concerns about the evaluation of my paper. The step-by-step instructions made my evaluation criteria clear. However, other than providing me with a chance to improve the technical aspects of my writing, this assignment completely ignored my voice as a writer. My frustration was rooted in the fact that I was asked to write someone else's essay in order to achieve an academic goal and, ironically, improve my writing.

The second assignment did just the opposite. It asked me to work in a purely creative way and ignore the academic context of my writing. Although I was uncomfortable writing this assignment, I eventually embraced the spirit of the assignment and repressed any concerns I had about academic success. The paper, which amounted to an overgrown freewriting exercise, gave me a chance to run with whatever ideas I felt like but didn't really teach me much.

Both these assignments were successful in achieving their specific goals, but neither one addressed my concerns as both a creative thinker and an evaluated writer. Although the third assignment was somewhat directive in its instructions, it still left room for my creative expression. Obviously some assignments require more emphasis on creative freedom or specific format and content requirements than others. However, this

assignment concentrated on the instructor's expectations without ignoring my need to express my individual perspective.

I feel that the frustrating assignments I've had were troublesome, not because they concentrated too much on one of these aspects of my writing, but rather because they fail at least to address both these sets of concerns. In classes where the assignments had very specific directions for completing written projects, I have rarely found these directions constrictive if I am simultaneously given an opportunity to include my own creative input. Conversely, even the most open-ended assignment can be free of the stress and uncertainty that can accompany complete creative freedom if the writer is given an idea of what basic elements are necessary to succeed academically.