Writing Assignment Prompts Across the Curriculum: Using the DAPOE Framework for Improved Teaching and Aggregable Research

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This article advances the DAPOE (directions, audience, purpose, objectives, and evaluation) framework to describe the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt and to assist genre uptake by students and teachers alike. To support our endorsement of this framework, we (1) ground our discussion of the writing assignment prompt in rhetorical genre theory; (2) define the five core components of the DAPOE framework; (3) synthesize the extant research on the formal writing assignment prompt; (4) demonstrate how this research-derived framework might be used as a research lens to analyze the effectiveness of writing assignment prompts across the curriculum; and, (5) discuss the implications of our framework and our research on writing across the curriculum initiatives.

The formal writing assignment prompt—or, what some instructors call an assignment sheet—has long been viewed as a site of confusing expectations and frustrated intentions. Across disciplinary fields and curricula, educators have acknowledged that the effectiveness of their inputs, including the effectiveness of their assignment prompting, influences the quality of learner outputs, especially the quality of students' writing (Cavdar & Doe, 2012; Cox et al., 2018; Hanson & Williams, 2008; Nevid et al., 2012; Robison, 1983; Soliday, 2011). When the educator input is "well-intentioned but potentially confusing," the "conventional wisdom among writing instructors" is that the writing assignment produced by students will be "less-than-successful" (Formo & Neary, 2020, p. 335). Put more strongly, the "haphazard, slapdash, ill-conceived, or ill-worded assignment invites bad writing, virtually assures capricious grading, and vitiates effective teaching," while the "well-planned assignment, by contrast, evokes the best from the students" (Throckmorton, 1980, p. 56). For over four decades, the impact of the formal writing assignment

prompt on student writing has attracted the attention of scholars interested in improving the quality of student writing across the curriculum. Behind the research into formal writing assignment prompts resides the sense, perhaps best articulated by Jenkins (1980), that "[t]oo often, in the wording and expectations of our assignments, we are placing all kinds of obstacles before our students" (p. 66).

Seeking ways to remove these obstacles and promote successfully crafted writing assignment prompts, some writing researchers have posed questions targeting the educator's input—that is, the writing assignment prompt—in order to improve the writing output by the student. As part of their online introduction to writing across the curriculum (2000-2021), Kiefer and co-authors ask: What makes a good writing assignment? Throckmorton (1980, p. 56) aims a more functional question directly at readers, inquiring: "Do your writing assignments work?" More recently, Formo and Neary (2020, p. 335) seek a collective improved practice, wondering: "How might we interrupt this cycle of unsuccessful assignment prompts and ineffective essays to develop stronger writers and, consequently, more successful writing?" These questions echo the questions of many writing instructors across the curriculum, who seek workable answers and practical strategies for developing effective writing assignment prompts that will promote strong student writing.

In response to such questions, researchers suggest care and clarity as two approaches that might improve the formal writing assignment prompt. Walvoord and McCarthy (1990) encourage writing teachers to "craft the assignment sheet with care" on account of the way students tend to approach formal writing assignment prompts (p. 240). Hobson (1998) echoes this approach, encouraging educators to ensure that each writing assignment "is carefully constructed" (p. 52). Kiefer and co-authors (2000–2021) advise that "a well-designed assignment will make the elements of the task clear to students," explaining that such clarity will help students "better understand the scope and challenge of the assignment" and will most likely "produce better learning and performance." Clarity in writing assignment prompting also receives endorsement in work by Jenkins (1980), Mitchell (1987), Anderson et al. (2015), Blaich et al. (2016), Gere et al. (2018), and Aull (2020). To make approaching the formal writing assignment prompt with care and clarity more practical, research on writing assignments regularly includes lists of principles, practices, or other heuristics designed to guide educators in the creation of better assignments (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Beene, 1987; Formo & Neary, 2020; Gardner, 2008; Jenkins, 1980; Kiefer, et al, 2000-2021; Lindemann, 2001; Throckmorton, 1980).

Viewed independent of one another, the current principles, practices, and heuristics that guide educators across the curriculum in crafting formal writing assignment prompts are valuable; however, when viewed in aggregate, three problems emerge with the existing guidance on formal writing assignment prompts. First, the existing

guidance varies widely in the number and type of essential components ascribed to the formal writing assignment prompt, leaving educators across the curriculum without an integrative, holistic approach to creating writing assignment prompts. Second, and as a result of the variance in essential prompt components, much of the existing guidance maintains a tenuous relationship with research, obfuscating the potential for large-scale and small-scale studies of writing assignment prompts. In turn, this tenuous relationship confuses educators across the curriculum as to whether subtly different approaches to writing assignments change the learning outcomes or writing outputs. Third, the existing guidance underemphasizes the importance of conceptualizing the formal writing assignment prompt as its own genre. As a result of this third problem, educators across the curriculum must work to implicitly detect the relationship between the structural and rhetorical elements of an effective writing assignment prompt.

To address these three problems, we propose a new holistic framework by which educators across the curriculum and within the disciplines can approach writing assignment development and also writing research. Our framework is called DAPOE, and it uses a mnemonic to convey the five core components—directions, audience, purpose, objectives, and evaluation—that are essential to the formal writing assignment prompt genre and ought to be included in any writing assignment across the curriculum. The DAPOE framework describes the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt and assists genre uptake by both students and teachers. In the remainder of this article, we support our endorsement of this framework by (1) grounding our discussion of the writing assignment prompt in rhetorical genre theory; (2) defining the five core components of the DAPOE framework; (3) synthesizing the extant research on the formal writing assignment prompt; (4) demonstrating how this research-derived framework might be used as a research lens to analyze the effectiveness of writing assignment prompts across the curriculum; and, (5) discussing the implications of our framework and our research on writing across the curriculum initiatives.

The Genre of the Formal Writing Assignment Prompt

Potentially the most confounding problem with current guidance on formal writing assignment prompt development is its treatment of genre. The guidance primarily focuses on discussing genre in terms of the student writing output, rather than discussing the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt in terms of the educator input. By associating genre with student writing output, the existing work leaves the conceptualization of the educator input underdeveloped. Following Bawarshi (2003), Clark (2005), Aull (2020), and Formo and Neary (2020), we contend that formal writing assignment prompts should be conceptualized as a genre in and of

themselves. We further hold that when genre is associated with the educator input, the nominal, archetypal, motivational, structural, rhetorical, and ideological characteristics of the formal writing assignment prompt might be more fully understood and taken up in a way that might well lead to more authentically transactional student writing. Indeed, formal writing assignment prompts possess the following six kinds of characteristics that allow for discrete pieces of writing to be understood, in aggregate, as a genre (e.g., Devitt, 2004; Harrell & Linkugel, 1978; Miller, 1984).

1. Nominal Characteristics

First, members of the genre possess nominal characteristics that offer a somewhat obvious and perceptible indicator of their membership to the genre. Whether called a formal writing assignment prompt, an assignment sheet, a writing prompt, or some other close name, these documents can all be perceived by teachers and students, experts and novices as a similar type of writing—an educator input that constructs a task to which students must respond in writing. In fact, the ease with which the formal writing assignment prompt genre can be named and perceived leads to another shared characteristic associated with the ease by which members of this writing assignment genre can be compared to relatively familiar images and artifacts.

2. Archetypal Characteristics

Second, members of the formal writing assignment prompt genre possess archetypal characteristics that allow them to be compared to other more familiar texts and images. Across existing work, writing assignment prompts receive repeated likening to recipes (Nelson, 1995; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990). These connected and familiar comparisons bind the members of the formal writing assignment prompt genre together. Drawing comparisons between a genre that can be difficult to understand (i.e., the formal writing assignment prompt) and a genre that is much more widely understood (i.e., the recipe) expands access to the more difficult genre. This expanded access depends upon familiar, if not archetypal, artifacts and images. In this way, Clark (2005) expands access to the writing assignment prompt genre by offering an extended comparison to stage directions and, with reference to work by Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff (2003), an analogous comparison to jury instructions, tax forms, or voting ballots. These archetypal references allow Clark to refine understanding of the formal writing assignment prompt genre, emphasizing how the members of this genre "are created by specialists for the purpose of generating an appropriate response from novices" (2005). By enabling comparison between a familiar genre and the less familiar genre of the formal writing assignment prompt, archetypal characteristics render the prompt genre more accessible for teachers and for students.

3. Motivational Characteristics

Third, members of this genre share a characteristic motivation. The educators who created these assignment sheets were motivated to do so in order to provide students with an assignment that would advance students' learning. The task was constructed as prompt or assignment in order to deliberately solicit a written response from students, which might then be evaluated by the educators in order to assess the degree to which a learning objective was achieved. Here, we return to the connection between the educator input and the student output: Educators are motivated to craft formal writing assignment prompts not only to elicit written responses from their students but also to increase the quality of their students' work and, at the same time, to reduce student confusion over the assignment. This connection between motivation and genre is one emphasized by Aull (2020), who argues that, once the nature of the genre is understood to be motivated by an educator's efforts to shape students' responses, then the "genre of writing assignments" is a "key consideration for postsecondary writing" (p. 33). As a deliberately constructed response task, formal writing assignment prompts differ from prompts motivated differently and less deliberately.

4. Structural Characteristics

Fourth, members of the formal writing assignment prompt genre possess structural characteristics or organizational patterns that repeat with regular frequency and regularity. Here, a review of eight pieces of recent scholarship that offer insight into the components of a formal writing assignment prompt sketches the general contour of a formal writing assignment prompt. The structural characteristics emerging from this review are represented in Table 1 and include components such as task instructions, target audience, evaluative criteria, learning objectives, formative feedback, and genre specifications.

Table 1. Comparison of structural characteristics described in writing assignment prompt research.

STUDY	DIRECTIONS	AUDIENCE	PURPOSE	OBJECTIVES	EVALUATION	OTHER ITEMS
Aull (2020)	"Assignment descriptions that indicate both what students are expected to do and what they are not expected to do can help guide students' understanding of genre and assignment expectations" (p. 149).		Assignments summarized according to "macrolevel purposes" (pp. 60-61).			• genre • genre families • student discourse patterns • student level (first-year or upper-level)
Bean & Melzer (2021)	"The task itself sets forth the subject matter dimensions of the assignment" (p. 66).	"When specifying an audience, the instructor needs to help students visualize the audience's initial stance toward the writer's subject" (p. 67).	"The 'role' or 'purpose' helps students understand the kind of change they hope to bring about in their audience's view of the subject matter" (p. 67).	"Teachers can build more learning power into their writing assignments and other critical thinking tasks if they focus first on their learning goals for students" (p. 62).	"This section explains how the instructor will grade students' work" (p. 68).	• task sequence • interactive components • disciplinary problem • genre • implied discourse community
BrckaLorenz (2018)	"Provide clear instructions describing what you wanted students to do" (p. 5).	"Address a real or imagined audience such as their classmates, a politician, non-experts, etc." (p. 5).		"Explain in advance what you wanted students to learn" (p. 5).	"Explain in advance the criteria you would use to grade the assignment" (p. 5).	• inventional talk • receive feedback • give feedback • summarize material • describe methods • argue position • explain data • field-specific style
Formo & Neary (2020)		"Names a specific audience" and "[p]rovides details about audience" (p. 340)		"Articulates learning outcomes" (p. 340)	"Includes assessment criteria/rubric" (p. 340)	• provides formatting requirements • references course texts • give options • asks questions • references in-class discussions • sequences tasks • states revision tasks • includes peer review
Hagemann (2002)	"What am I being asked to do?" and "[w]hat skills or procedures do I need to produce my text?" Also, "[h]ow long should the text be?" and "[w]hat are the deadlines for writing" (p. 6).		"What is the purpose of the assignment? Why am I asked to do it?" (p. 6).		"What are the grading criteria for this assignment?" (p. 6).	• course materials • genre models • feedback • provides formatting requirements • references course
Kiefer et al. (2000-2021)	"Break down the task into manageable steps" and "[m]ake all elements of the task clear"	"Note rhetorical aspects of the task, i.e., audience, purpose, writing situation"	"Note rhetorical aspects of the task, i.e., audience, purpose, writing situation"	"Tie the writing task to specific pedagogical goals, particularly those articulated in the overall course goals"	"Include grading criteria on the assignment sheet"	
Melzer (2014)		"What audiences are students asked to address?" (p. 14).	"What purposes are students asked to write for in different disciplines?" (p. 14).			• genre • discourse communities • institutional type • course type • WAC presence
Singleterry & Caulfield (2021)	"Directions are the guidance system of the assignment" (p. 123).		"The purpose is an opportunity for the faculty member to explain how and why the knowledge, skills, or attitudes gained from the assignment are important in practice" (p. 122).	"The objectives should reflect what the faculty member wants the student to achieve or do" (pp. 122-123).	"[C]ommunicate the intent of grading and communicate the type of data that will be used for evaluation" (p. 123).	
Across All Studies	6	5	6	4	6	

Looking more closely at the structure that emerges from this review, we argue that the directions, audience, purpose, objectives, and evaluation are the five essential components that structure the formal writing assignment prompt genre. If a piece of writing were to include these five elements, that document would most likely participate in the genre. From our perspective, formative feedback is not an essential structural characteristic of the formal writing assignment prompt genre. Rather, formative feedback is a process that is regularly built into writing assignments but that actually relies upon other genres (e.g., peer review or writing center talk) and different genre knowledge than does the formal writing assignment prompt that it supports (e.g., see Reid, 2014; Mackiewicz, 2016). Similarly, and perhaps more controversially, we would argue that genre specifications do not emerge as a consistent component that is essential to the structure of the formal writing assignment prompt genre. On the contrary, genre is represented inconsistently across existing work on writing prompts. In some instances, genre specifications are reduced to instructions about format or form; in other instances, genre specifications are merely tied to the presentation of models (Formo & Neary, 2020; Hagemann, 2002). Both of these presentations of genre specifications erode the rhetorical understanding of genre that is widely endorsed in writing studies, and this rhetorical theory of genre leads directly to the next characteristic of the formal writing assignment genre.

5. Rhetorical Characteristics

Fifth, members of the formal writing assignment genre hold a set of rhetorical characteristics, or characteristics that allow the writing prompt to navigate the dynamics of typified rhetorical situations (Miller, 1984), including similar exigences, audiences, and constraints (Bitzer, 1968). Bazerman and co-authors (2005) offer an extended discussion of how the rhetorical characteristics of the "the sheet of paper handed out by the teacher" facilitates social activity (p. 93). According to Bazerman and co-authors, "the assignment genre" shapes the rhetorical situation in a classroom: "the situation is temporarily initiated by the assignment" (p. 94). The "assignment situation," as Bazerman and co-authors call it, requires action—that is, a written response—on the part of the student; however, Bazerman and coauthors note that students have "limited range to reframe the situation to allow novel responses only insofar as the teacher accepts those reframings" (pp. 93–94). Thus, the writing assignment prompt genre creates the situation in which student responses are viewed as fitting or appropriate. As Clark (2005) explains, the rhetorical characteristics of genre extend beyond structural characteristics, recasting "the form and textual conventions of a text, elements which students often view as primary concerns" as emerging from "the rhetorical purpose of the text." Foregrounding the rhetorical characteristics of the writing assignment prompt, we contend that the essential structural elements of the

genre—directions, audience, purpose, objectives, and evaluation—are conventional among members of the genre because these components minimally allow students (i.e., the audience) to respond to the constructed writing task (i.e., the exigence) and to navigate educator expectations (i.e., the constraints) for the learning output. These five components create a situation that offers the student-as-assignment-reader the opportunity to fittingly respond to the task as the student-as-assignment-writer. The reader-writer shift inaugurated by the formal writing assignment genre leads to the sixth characteristic of the genre.

6. Ideological Characteristics

Sixth and finally, members of the formal writing assignment prompt genre share ideological characteristics in that they socialize writers and readers, interpellating individuals into typified roles and, also, transforming these roles. Bawarshi (2003) cautions educators against overlooking "the extent to which the prompt situates student writers within a genred site of action in which students acquire and negotiate desires, subjectivities, commitments, and relations before they begin to write" (p.127). As Bawarshi notes, writing assignment prompts powerfully determine student agency through a "socializing function" (p. 129): the "prompt not only *moves* the student writer to action; it also *cues* the student writer to enact a certain kind of action" (p.127). By coordinating, moving, and cueing students, the formal writing assignment prompt genre "functions to transform its writer (the teacher) and its readers (the students) into a reader (the teacher) and writers (the students)" and, thus, "positions the students and teacher into two simultaneous roles: the students as readers and writers, the teacher as writer and reader" (pp. 130–131). Put differently, the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt shifts agency from the writing teacher, who was the writer of the prompt and who will be a reader of the assignment, to the student writers, who were the readers of the prompt and who will be the writers of the assignment.

Having outlined the six characteristics—nominal, archetypal, motivational, structural, rhetorical, and ideological—that bind members of the formal writing assignment prompt genre together, we see potential that an increased awareness of these characteristics might be rhetorically mobilized in a way that could well lead to more authentically transactional student writing. Here, we invoke Petraglia's view that "the move toward WAC holds the most promise for those teachers wishing to ensure that their students are given an authentic rhetorical exigence and are being held accountable to genuine transaction" (1995, p. 28). Petraglia's point is that writing assignments constructed for classroom learning are, to a degree, necessarily inauthentic and arhetorical; they are more or less pseudotransactional as Britton et al. (1975) might

say, or invented, as Bawarshi (2003) might argue. The promise of writing across the curriculum to which Petraglia refers necessarily depends upon the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt. If the characteristics of the assignment prompt genre are overly diminished or overly amplified, authenticity might be diminished. Conversely, if the characteristics of the assignment prompt genre are understood, increased authenticity might be encouraged. According to Wilner (2005b), "purposeful assignment design can play an essential role in evoking complex transactions with texts" and, consequently, "students benefit when instructors are more attentive to this essential aspect of pedagogy" (p. 35). With the aim of increasing instructor attention to the development of formal writing assignment prompts across disciplines and also increasing the transactional nature of writing assignments across the curriculum, we outline our DAPOE framework in the next section.

The DAPOE Framework

To address the three problems with the existing guidance on the formal writing assignment prompts genre—namely, a lack of consistent components, an unclear relationship between guidance and research, and an incomplete theorization of prompt as genre—and to seize the opportunity to provide students with more authentically transactional writing assignments, we advance the DAPOE framework. The DAPOE framework holistically approaches formal writing assignment prompting. This synthetic and integrative framework can assist writing instructors in remembering key aspects of formal writing assignment design as they aim to produce assignment prompts for their students, and it can also serve as a useful lens to researchers who want to assess the strength of assignment prompts.

The DAPOE framework updates and expands upon two prior attempts to develop a framework to guide writing assignment prompt design. First, the DAPOE framework updates efforts by Robison (1983), as described by Walvoord and McCarty (1990, pp. 150-152), to develop a mnemonic that captures the essential parts of a formal writing assignment prompt. According to Walvoord and McCarthy, Robison's CRAFT mnemonic helped to make the cognitive psychologist's expectations explicit to the student writers enrolled in a human sexuality course (p. 150). In the mnemonic, C detailed assignment criteria, R described the writer's role, A articulated the writer's audience, F detailed the form of writing, and T set forth a theme for the assignment (p. 151). Walvoord and McCarthy explain that, in addition to explicitly outlining writing assignment expectations, the CRAFT mnemonic functioned as a "formula" that could be used as "a guide for teachers in constructing assignments" (p. 151). Second, the DAPOE framework expands upon prior work by Singleterry and Caulfield (2021) that explicitly links four components of writing assignment design —purpose, objectives, directions, and evaluation—to create "an instructional

design tool and quality improvement method" that is both "interprofessional and versatile" (p. 123). Emerging from Singleterry and Caulfield's involvement in a faculty development program that spanned four years, the four-element design tool was introduced and practiced by a group of seventeen faculty members across various health and human services disciplines in order to generate stronger writing assignment prompts and improve writing across the curriculum (pp.122–123). Singleterry and Caulfield report that "faculty from multiple disciplines" found the tool "useful to improve development, assessment, and revision of student assignments" (p.122).

Further, the DAPOE framework joins together theoretical elements from established lines of research in rhetoric and backward design, combining them with the directional component that serves as the basis for any assignment instructions.

Rhetoric has been theorized both as a critical aspect of crafting successful writing assignment prompts (Fishman & Reiff, 2011; Oliver, 1995), as well as an underappreciated dimension of writing assignment prompt design across the curriculum (Melzer, 2014). Lindemann (2001) explains that "[e]ffective writing assignments encourage students to define progressively more complex rhetorical problems" and the educator's "responsibility is to control and vary the rhetorical demands of writing tasks" (p. 215). Mitchell (1987) refers to the rhetorical dimensions of the writing assignment prompt as "most important; since the writing experience arises from the rhetorical situation" (p. 6). Consideration of an assignment's rhetorical situation—its exigence, audience, and constraints—reveals a range of assignment options for writing instructors and establishes a foundation upon which students can engage with a writing assignment (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Melzer, 2014). Further, an assignment's rhetorical situation necessarily leads to a consideration of its genre and the discourse communities within which that genre will function (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Melzer, 2014; Anderson & Gonyea, 2009). On account of engaging with a rhetorical situation and its component parts, student writers can ascertain "a social context" and can, therefore, locate an "appropriate stance" with respect to their readers and their writing (Soliday, 2011, p. 55). The rhetorical components of an effective writing assignment prompt also require alignment (Gere et al., 2018). When rhetorical theory does not inform assignment design, teaching inefficiencies result and impossible pedagogical goals follow (Burnett & Kastman, 1997; Downs & Wardle, 2007). We follow existing work on assignment design (Bean & Melzer, 2021; Downs & Wardle, 2007; Melzer, 2014) in our assertion that rhetorical theory is a critical component of assignment prompt design, as it emphasizes a realistic, situated, and necessarily complex notion of writing.

Backward design has been theorized by numerous scholars to be a promising solution to the instructional problems faced by faculty in post-secondary education (Childre et al. 2009; Fox & Doherty, 2012; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Backward

design theory holds that learning objectives and desired outcomes should drive the curriculum design process. By identifying desired outcomes first, backward design focuses on identifying evidence of achieving these outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). In this way, instructors are encouraged to focus their attention not on their personal teaching processes, but on the outcomes of their students' learning (Driscoll & Wood, 2007). Backward design might be thought of as prioritizing a writing course's "last assignment first" and then designing earlier writing assignments in such a way that they lead students into that last assignment (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 63). Similarly, if writing instructors plan their end-of-course goals first, they can then plan student learning objectives in such a way that leads to meeting those goals and, also, writing assignments that allow students to accomplish those objectives. Thus, writing assignment design should be inextricably linked to a writing course's goals, as learning outcomes are heavily dependent upon the types of prompts provided to students by their instructors. Real-world, complex problems, for example, have been observed by numerous scholars to encourage greater synthesis of information for the student, which in turn leads to more satisfactory student learning outcomes (Bean, 2011; Childre, et al. 2009; Demetriadis et al. 2008; Fox & Doherty, 2012; Shah, et al. 2018; Wilner, 2005b).

In sum, the DAPOE framework fuses directional instruction, rhetorical theory, and backward design theory to promote better understanding of the formal writing assignment prompt genre. The framework makes explicit five critical elements in writing assignment prompt design: directions, audience, purpose, objectives, and evaluation.

Directions

Directions serve as the overarching component of the DAPOE framework, as they are the basis upon which any assignment is built. Through directions, the instructor is able to communicate expectations for the work to the student (Dunham et al. 2020; Herrington, 1997; Nelson, 1990, 1995). Directions encompass assignment specifications, which allows them to enable meaning-making via communication from instructor to student; this component, therefore, holds primacy of place. Furthermore, directions entail the actual giving of the assignment, as they direct the student to perform an action that will then produce a result. In the case of the formal writing assignment, the result is the finished piece of writing. Clear assignment directions have been identified as an area in need of improvement in post-secondary classrooms (Blaich et al., 2016). Without clear directions detailing expectations, student learning outcomes can suffer greatly (Minnich et al., 2018). In fact, writing assignment instructions and their relative clarity form the basis of one item included on two widely adopted national assessment instruments—the National Survey of

Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) Experiences with Writing Topical Module (BrckaLorenz, 2018). Our DAPOE framework, thus, begins where all effective writing assignments begin—using directions to instruct students on the assigned writing task. Highlighting the importance of "[i]nstructional specifications," Mitchell (1987) connects directions with effectively meeting expectations, observing that "[s]tudents need to know date due, page length minimum, and so on in order to meet expectations" (p. 6).

Audience

Audience describes the intended readership of the materials that are produced from the assigned writing prompts (Beene, 1987; Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Gallagher, 2017; Lunsford & Ede, 1996; McDermott & Kuhn, 2011; Mitchell, 1987; Throckmorton, 1980; Weiser et al., 2009; Wilner, 2005a, 2005b). Effective writing assignment prompts, as Formo and Neary emphasize, "help students understand *for whom* they are writing" (2020, p. 347; cf. Lindemann, 2001, Bawarshi, 2003). The DAPOE framework realizes the possibility that the intended audience for a formal writing assignment may not be a writing instructor and, therefore, asks writing instructors to identify the assignment's intended audience. As Bean and Melzer note, identifying a formal writing assignment's audience helps "set the rhetorical context" and allows students to "visualize the audience's initial stance toward the writer's subject" (2021, p. 67). Here, *stance* refers to a perspective that relates writer and reader to each other through writing (cf. Soliday, 2011). By naming an exact audience, a formal writing assignment prompt can help student writers "get better acquainted with an audience" (Soliday, 2011, p.78) and, thereby, allow them to craft writing that addresses this key relationship. Naming a specific audience on a writing prompt also avoids a scenario in which the student writer addresses the writing prompt directly or assumes they are addressing a teacher-as-audience (Clark, 2005). When a formal writing assignment tasks students with addressing an actual reader outside of the classroom—that is, as opposed to a hypothetical one—specifying the audience for a writing assignment assists students in defining the role of the writer vis-à-vis the identity of the reader (Lindemann, 2001). The audience component of the DAPOE framework finds reinforcement in the Experiences with Writing Topical Module included on both the NSSE and FSSE, as these survey instruments ask respondents to gauge the number of writing assignments that encouraged students to address a real or imagined audience (BrckaLorenz, 2018). In short, effective formal writing assignments use prompts that specify the audience for the assignment.

Purpose

Purpose asks the students to consider why the writing is being performed. In other words, purpose explores the rationale behind the writing assignment (Beene, 1987; Fletcher, 2015; Lindemann, 2001; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Troia, 2014; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) or the occasion that conditions the writing task, whether that occasion is a pseudotransactional academic exercise or a transactional real-world experience (Gogan, 2014; Mitchell, 1987; Petraglia, 1995). The DAPOE framework conceptualizes purpose as the purpose of the writing that will be produced by the student who completes a formal writing assignment. Put differently, the DAPOE framework conceptualizes purpose as what the writing does. In this way, the purpose used in the DAPOE framework approximates Bean and Melzer's (2021) discussion of an "implied discourse community" that is present and at work in every formal writing assignment (p. 68). By clearly articulating the purpose for a writing assignment, a writing instructor can explain "to students how an assignment does the work of the broader disciplinary or professional community" and thereby can "make the writing assignment more relevant for students" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 69). As such, purpose promotes awareness of discourse communities and the genres that coordinate the social action within these communities. Relatedly, purpose might also be associated with motive. The social context of a discourse community reinforces the rhetorical dimensions of writing and often helps student writers locate an appropriate stance (Soliday, 2011). When "rhetorical purpose" is not established and writing tasks are "isolated from the social worlds that produce and sustain them," writing assignments are reduced to what Soliday (2011) describes as a "somewhat lonely process: students read a prompt, find their evidence, and write a text" (p. 84). Purpose thus becomes a critical term in promoting complex discursive awareness among students (Clark, 2005).

Objectives

Objectives present the actionable steps that lead to the attainment of the goals of the assignment (Anderson, 2005; Mitchell, 1987; Ramirez, 2016; Winkelmes et al., 2015). The focus on discrete learning objectives and the ability to tie these objectives to course goals allows writing instructors to "build more learning power into their writing assignments" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 62). Further, including objectives on a writing assignment prompt has been understood as providing "students the opportunity to practice metacognition" (Formo & Neary, 2020, p. 346). The DAPOE framework emphasizes the inclusion of learning objectives in formal writing assignment prompts. This emphasis is further reflected in a NSSE and FSSE Experiences with Writing Topical Module question, asking respondents to gauge the amount of

writing assignments that detail the learning that should result because of the assignment (BrckaLorenz, 2018). Effective writing assignments unambiguously declare the objectives of a particular assignment, tying these objectives into even larger course goals, and our DAPOE framework stresses this important component of formal writing assignment design.

Evaluation

Evaluation enables assessment of the assignment to ensure that objectives are met (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011). Simply put, a writing assignment prompt that contains this component of the DAPOE framework tells students how their writing assignment will be graded (Bean & Melzer, 2021). The presence of this particular component in a formal writing assignment prompt works to demystify the grading of writing for students, who often view writing assessment as an opaquely and perhaps unfairly "subjective" process (Anson & Dannels, 2002, p. 387). By enumerating the evaluative criteria that will guide grading, the writing assignment prompt promotes fairness and aligns student expectations with the expectations of the grader. In fact, Formo and Neary (2020) contend that including evaluation criteria on a writing assignment prompt "provide[s] a shared language for writer and evaluator" and this shared language not only enables a discussion between teachers and students "about the strengths and weaknesses of an assignment" but also empowers student writers, giving them "tools for evaluating their own work" (p. 351). If the assignment is used in a classroom that has moved away from conventional grading, then this evaluation element would explain to students the mechanism that would provide them formal feedback on their writing assignment (Blum, 2021). The DAPOE framework reinforces Mitchell's (1987) view that the evaluative criteria "are [a] particularly important" component of the writing assignment prompt (p. 6). The evaluation component of the DAPOE framework finds reinforcement in the Experiences with Writing Topical Module included on both the NSSE and FSSE, as the module queries both students and faculty about the amount of writing assignments that provide advanced criteria about assignment grading (BrckaLorenz, 2018). Our DAPOE framework features the evaluation component as its fifth and final element.

   In our own work, we have found this five-part framework to be particularly useful for the way it structures our thinking about writing assignment prompt design. Whether informing the development of a new assignment within one of our courses or informing the professional development of faculty attending a workshop at our institution, the DAPOE framework assists us in thinking about the components of effective writing assignments. In brief, the framework helps us improve our teaching of writing. But beyond helping us teach writing and assign more thorough writing tasks to our students, the framework has also helped us research the effectiveness of

writing assignment prompts at our university. Indeed, we argue that the DAPOE framework can be used as an analytic lens that can applied to research on formal writing assignment prompts. The next section reviews recent research on the formal writing assignment genre, while the final section of the article presents an example of how the DAPOE framework can inform research.

Research on Formal Writing Assignment Prompts across the Curriculum

Over the past four decades, research on developing effective writing assignments has grown from a local endeavor largely undertaken by teachers preparing for work with students in one particular post-secondary course or at one particular institution to a national undertaking informed by research on writing across the curriculum. The definition of writing-intensive courses as a high-impact practice in post-secondary educational settings (Hendrickson, 2016; Hughes, 2020; Kuh, 2008) increased focus on the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt and its ability to foster broad student engagement and active learning across the curriculum and within writing-intensive courses (Eodice et al. 2016; Kuh, 2008). Effective writing assignments support the effectiveness of this high-impact practice, and the national attention paid to high impact practices has been accompanied by an interest in formal writing assignment prompts that is likewise national in scope. Our DAPOE framework reflects these locally grown and nationally emergent studies.

The NSSE and the FSSE, and particularly their Experiences with Writing Topical Module, include self-report survey items that query respondents about their experiences with writing (Anderson et al. 2015; BrckaLorenz, 2018; Paine et al., 2015). Designed through a collaboration between NSSE and the Council of Writing Program Administrators that was named the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, these survey items solicit robust information about formal writing assignment prompts from students and from faculty. Analysis of data obtained from these survey items offers important insight into formal writing assignment prompts, especially as these prompts work to set clear writing expectations and facilitate meaning making. The data reveal that "students who reported that more of their writing assignments involved clearly explained expectations were more likely to report greater experience with Higher-Order Learning in the classroom" (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 222). The findings from these results suggest a relationship, wherein student reports of more positive behaviors and perceptions result from instructors actively working to provide clearer explanation of writing assignments. Further, the outcomes of FSSE data (BrckaLorenz, 2018) reveal that 82.7 percent of faculty report providing directions, while only 25.2 percent report addressing the idea of audience to their students on their formal writing assignment prompts.

The formal writing assignment prompts that are given by instructors to their students prove the focus of two additional national-level studies (Formo & Neary, 2020;

Melzer, 2014). Rather than soliciting self-report data that detail behaviors and perceptions as the NSSE and FSSE did, the first study conducted by Melzer analyzed 2,101 writing assignment prompts from one hundred institutions in an attempt to detect patterns about the writing that was assigned across various curricula within the United States. This study revealed that, overall, writing assignments were limited in the purposes and audiences to which students were asked to respond (Melzer, 2014). Importantly, this first study served as a design model for the second study conducted by Formo and Neary (2020). Although limited to assignment prompts in first-year writing courses, this second study examined seventy-five formal writing assignment prompts from a range of post-secondary institutions, coding them for the presence of themes. The coding scheme relied upon a threshold concept framework, but yielded findings that included the need for writing assignment prompts to articulate learning objectives, name specific audiences, and clarify evaluation criteria (Formo & Neary, 2020).

Taken together and represented in Table 2 as viewed through our DAPOE framework, these empirical studies point to a number of necessary improvements that are needed in the formal writing assignment prompts that writing teachers across the curriculum distribute to their students. Although the writing assignment prompt constitutes a "fundamental classroom artifact" (Melzer, 2014, p. 5) and "plays a critical role in constituting the teacher and student positions that shape and enable student writing" (Bawarshi, 2003, p. 126), the research on formal writing assignment prompts across the curriculum suggests a need for more effective assignment prompts. We return to these national research studies later in this article, after we present findings of our own research that used the DAPOE framework to analyze formal writing assignment prompts distributed to students at our own institution.

Table 2. Comparison of DAPOE elements identified in previous assignment prompt research

	DIRECTIONS	AUDIENCE	PURPOSE	OBJECTIVES	EVALUATION
Formo & Neary (2020)	93%	45%	NA	39%	36%
BrckaLorenz (2018)	82.7%	25.2%	NA	68.5%	74.2%
Melzer (2014)	NA	~60%*	~100%**	NA	NA
*= Implied by write-up of findings **= Interpreted according to methodology					

Using the DAPOE Framework as an Analytical Lens

To demonstrate the way in which the DAPOE framework can serve as a useful lens through which researchers might view formal writing assignment prompts, we conducted a study of formal writing assignment prompts at our institution. Our study, approved by our institutional review board, used the DAPOE framework as a lens to code ninety-five writing assignment prompts as they were used with students across four colleges at our home institution. This part of our article offers a research application of the DAPOE framework and, in doing so, provides a glimpse of contemporary writing assignment prompt design across the curricula of one institution.

Institutional Context

Our study occurred at our home institution, a doctoral-granting, regional, public university in the Midwest that is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as both high research and community engaged. At the time of the 2019–2020 study, our university enrolled approximately 17,000 undergraduate students and 4,500 graduate students. As part of their general education requirements, all undergraduate students needed to successfully complete a baccalaureate writing course. These courses had been in place at our university since 1988 and were intended to "enhance" undergraduate "writing proficiency" through an upper-level writing-intensive course that was most regularly offered in students' major disciplines (Western Michigan University, 1988). The requirement attempted to integrate writing across our university's various curricula and it persisted for decades, until a revision to our general education requirements in fall 2020. Importantly, the new general education program no longer *requires* students to complete such a course; rather, the new program supports and endorses the continuation of university baccalaureate writing courses at the level of individual major programs.

Study Methodology

Timed to occur just before the change to the baccalaureate writing requirement, our study sought to measure the presence of the DAPOE framework in writing assignment prompts that were used with undergraduate students in baccalaureate writing classes across our university in the three semesters prior to the change—spring 2019, fall 2019, and spring 2020. The aim of our study was descriptive. The central question that guided our research was: To what extent do the five elements of the DAPOE framework appear in writing assignment prompts in upper-level writing-intensive courses at our institution?

To suggest answers to this question, we recruited nearly three hundred faculty members who taught a baccalaureate writing course at our institution in any one

of the three semesters under investigation to participate in our study. Recruitment occurred via email and asked potential participants to submit formal writing assignment documents used in their major writing course to a research assistant who supported the study. Consent was considered tacit upon submission of the writing assignment prompts. Upon submission, the research assistant processed each document, removing any identifying information such as the course title, instructor name, or semester offering date.

Once the research assistant removed identifying information from the submitted documents, writing assignment documents were shared with the study's three investigators. Each investigator used the qualitative research software application NVivo® version 12+ to code the assignment documents. The DAPOE framework guided our coding scheme, in which the

- *Directions Code* indicated instructions for the assignment were provided
- *Audience Code* indicated that the intended reader of the assignment was identified
- *Purpose Code* indicated that the reason behind or rationale for the assignment was explained
- *Objectives Code* indicated that the learning outcomes that were supposed to result from the assignment were recognized
- *Evaluation Code* indicated that the criteria against which the assignment was to be assessed were described

Code presence was treated as a nominal, binary variable. Coded results were compared and, in cases of coding discrepancies among the investigators, interrater agreement was reached through collective analysis and discussion.

Results and Analysis

In total, ninety-five writing assignment prompts were submitted by participants. These prompts appeared on a range of pedagogical documents (handouts, assignment sheets, syllabi, rubrics, and even one image file of a handwritten prompt) from a wide range of departments across our university (Table 3).

Table 3. Sampling of departments represented in data

Business and Information Systems	Communication
Economics	English
Environmental Studies	Family and Consumer Sciences
Geography	History
Nursing	Psychology
Sociology	Special Education and Literacy Studies
Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences	World Languages and Literatures

Together the writing assignment prompts represented curricula offered by four of our university's seven academic undergraduate colleges:

- College of Arts and Sciences
- College of Education and Human Development
- College of Health and Human Services
- Haworth College of Business

Instructors in the College of Fine Arts, College of Aviation, and the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences chose not to participate in the study and did not submit any formal writing assignment prompts that could be coded.

The results of our coding (see Table 4) indicate that the most common code found among submitted documents was directions, which was present in 85.3 percent of the assignment prompts reviewed (81/95). Audience was named in 32.6 percent (31/95) of the documents; purpose was identified in 53.7 percent (51/95) of the documents; objectives were found in 73.7 percent of the documents (70/95); and 65.3 percent of the documents described the criteria for the evaluation (62/95).

Table 4. Coding results

	DIRECTIONS	AUDIENCE	PURPOSE	OBJECTIVES	EVALUATION
Frequency	81	31	51	70	62
Percentage	85.3%	32.6%	53.7%	73.7%	65.3%
N = 95					

Discussion

The results from our study offer insight into the pedagogical use of formal writing assignment prompts at our institution. Just as other national studies of formal writing assignment prompts found the directions component to appear with greater frequency in their data sets (BrckaLorenz, 2018; Formo & Neary, 2020), so too did our study. Directions were found to be present in 85.3 percent of the ninety-five writing assignment prompts that we coded. While the directions component of our DAPOE framework appeared most frequently in the formal writing prompts we studied, 14.7 percent of these prompts were still missing this overarching component, leaving students without instructions for their writing assignment.

The data further reveal that, beyond providing students with assignment directions, these formal writing assignment prompts from across curricula at our institution were more likely to include concepts borrowed from backward design (objectives and evaluation) than from rhetorical theory (audience and purpose). On the one hand, a decade worth of institutional context might help explain these results, as our home institution has worked concertedly to cultivate outcomes-based assessment practices that strongly align with backward design theory over the past ten years. On the other hand, these results align with data reported by BrckaLorenz's 2018 study of 4,722 responses to the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. The frequencies of faculty who report including the backward design components and rhetorical components associated with the DAPOE framework on "all writing assignments" in BrckaLorenz's study (2018) approximate the frequencies detected by our own study.

Of the two DAPOE framework components associated with backward design, objectives appeared most frequently and were stated as student learning goals or outcomes in 73.7 percent of our sample. Evaluation criteria were offered to students in 65.3 percent of the writing assignment prompts examined in our study. If the benefits of backward design include more effective student guidance and improved learning outcomes, then at least one-third of the writing assignment prompts we studied miss an opportunity to realize these benefits. When a writing assignment prompt does not include learning objectives or does not state evaluation criteria, students may not understand nor fully engage with the learning that is associated with the writing assignment. These data suggest a need for a more consistent approach to crafting formal writing assignment prompts across the curriculum that include objectives and evaluation components and, thereby, provide students with advanced notice as to what they are learning by completing a writing assignment and how their learning and writing will be assessed.

Of the two DAPOE framework components associated with rhetoric, purpose appeared most frequently in 53.7 percent of the prompts we analyzed. Not only does purpose encompass choices about genre and discourse communities (Melzer, 2014),

but it also anticipates and answers crucial questions from our students, such as: Why am I being assigned to write this particular piece? The results suggest an opportunity to use the writing assignment prompt to better communicate the purpose of an assignment to student writers. Nearly half of the prompts we studied did not contain this extremely important piece of information and, therefore, did not communicate the reason behind or the rationale for the writing assignment to students. Further, audience—an essential consideration for any writer—was the least frequently included element from our DAPOE framework in our study's data. Audience was identified in 32.6 percent of the writing assignment prompts that we examined from writing-intensive courses at our university, which means that 67.4 percent of the assignment prompts we examined did not provide students with information about the audience for whom they were writing. Along with Melzer (2014), we recognize that audience might often be presented implicitly in writing assignment prompts— that is, in a way that faculty assume students will detect. However, this assumption may not be shared by students and might leave a gap in student understanding or connection to context-specific writing strategies. Because audience proves an essential rhetorical component of any authentically situated writing task, the indication that some two-thirds of the assignments did not name an audience proves concerning to educators who aim to cultivate rhetorical awareness among their student writers.

Implications for the DAPOE Framework

Throughout this article we have followed Throckmorton (1980) in understanding the development of a writing assignment prompt as "an art" (p. 56)—just as we might understand teaching as an art, writing as an art, and teaching writing across the curriculum as an art. Our central argument has been that the DAPOE framework helps to refine the art of crafting a formal writing assignment prompt and, as a result, may assist us in the art of teaching writing across the curriculum. More specifically, we see two significant implications emerging from the use of the DAPOE framework: The ability of the DAPOE framework to support explicit instruction and the ability of the DAPOE framework to support replicable, aggregable, and data-driven research. To conclude, we outline each implication below.

DAPOE Supports an Explicit Approach to Instruction

In viewing the development of a writing assignment prompt as an art, we enter into the debate of whether or not writing—including the writing of an assignment prompt—is a teachable art (Pender, 2011). With respect to the art of the formal writing assignment prompt, we embrace Fahnestock's (1993) view that any art must also include "an explication of its principles so that they can be applied across situations" (p. 269). Our DAPOE framework works to explain the art of the formal writing

assignment prompt in a way that is explicit. We ground Fahnestock's (1993) general argument that the explicit teaching of genre is necessary, possible, and useful in the specific instance of the formal writing assignment prompt. We echo Fahnestock's words—"One has to know the form to be able to perform" (1993, p. 267)—and assert that one has to know the form of the writing assignment prompt genre in order to be able to perform the art of the writing assignment prompt genre. This assertion is one that we view as true for writing students across the curriculum and especially so for writing teachers across the curriculum. Writing teachers across the curriculum must know the form of the writing assignment prompt genre before they can know how to perform that genre well in terms of their educational inputs. Our hope is that the explicit approach taken by our DAPOE framework might nudge instructors toward clearer and less confusing assignment directions, but also toward more authentic rhetorical transactions, more thorough genre uptake, and more carefully designed writing experiences and outputs. To this end, we see promise in the use of the DAPOE framework in faculty development workshops, where this framework could serve as a heuristic that encourages faculty across university curricula to think differently about writing assignment prompts. Indeed, members of the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College envisioned that data from the Experiences with Writing Topical Module might be used in faculty development initiatives (Cole et al., 2013). Our framework might be understood as one such outgrowth of this research. Certainly, we would argue that the DAPOE framework lends itself to use with and recall by diverse faculty groups across post-secondary curricula.

DAPOE Supports a RAD Approach to Research

In viewing the DAPOE framework as an analytical lens for research, we are suggesting that the implications of this explicit framework can move beyond pedagogical application and support ongoing research and assessment on writing across the curriculum. We found comparison between our own study data and the recent national studies on writing assignment prompt (Formo & Neary, 2020; Melzer, 2014) insufficient insofar as we used different coding schemes with some overlapping constructs. Due to the differing constructs, direct comparison across all studies was limited. We found ourselves in want of grounding constructs for our study of the genre—ones that might allow us to see how our institution's formal writing assignment prompts compared to those of other programs and at other institutions. In short, we sought a framework that lends itself to replicable, aggregable, and data-driven research or what Haswell (2005) calls a RAD approach to research. What we sought in our analysis of the genre and what we hope to have produced in the DAPOE framework is "a systematic scheme of analysis that others can apply to different texts and directly compare" (Haswell, 2005, p. 208). While such an approach to research might buck

overall trends in scholarship in writing and in writing across the curriculum (see Haswell, 2005), what we sought aligns with Haswell's hope for a more productive and inclusive approach to research, which is also echoed in the work on writing center studies by Driscoll and Perdue (2014). The potential for the DAPOE framework to be used in a way that supports a RAD approach to research further follows Melzer's (2014) own movement toward such an approach in writing across the curriculum research. The advantages to such an approach would allow writing across the curriculum researchers to navigate "reasonable contextual differences" (Driscoll & Perdue, 2014, p. 133) that accompany the different institutional cultures and histories that have shaped specific writing across the curriculum initiatives and to advance knowledge about formal writing assignment prompts and their development. We would add that such an approach might actually be more accessible to faculty colleagues in fields outside of writing studies. These colleagues might well hail from fields where the RAD approach to research is the dominant mode of knowledge making.

In short—and, also, in archetypal terms—the DAPOE framework is a recipe (cf. Nelson, 1995; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990) that we offer to teachers and researchers of writing across the curriculum. By sharing this recipe, our hope is to clarify the genre of the formal writing assignment prompt for our students, our colleagues, and ourselves. Anecdotally, when we've shared this recipe with our own colleagues at faculty development sessions and professional conferences, the results have been met with approval and good reviews. Participants expressed gratitude for, as one person stated, "providing me a roadmap for assignment development." The framework has, in our experience, offered faculty a best practice in writing assignment prompt development by placing "emphasis on helping faculty establish better writing assignments," as the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College would have us do (Cole et al., 2013, p. 5).

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