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Using student concerns to improve writing assignment sheets

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Using student concerns to improve writing assignment sheets

by

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ABSTRACT

Within the field of writing composition, current literature and research for developing clear and effective writing assignment sheets inadequately address students’ concerns. Understanding students’ concerns could allow instructors to generate assignments that challenge students while sparking their interest and stimulating their intellectual development.

High levels of detail in writing assignments limit students’ investment in a writing assignment. Students feel that highly structured tasks are a matter of being able to closely follow the directions of a writing assignment sheet, simply a check to see if they read the material or pay attention in class. There is no opportunity for exploration of a topic of interest nor a presentation of their argument in their own voice when instructors restrict writing tasks by overly dictating genre, style, expression, topic, length, etc.

Instructors should challenge students to think critically when approaching a writing task. If instructors provide students with too much information about the writing task, there is little opportunity for them to develop higher-level critical thinking. We need to develop writing assignment sheets that present students with a writing task of a particular type (summary, analysis, synthesis, argument, etc.), outlining particular skills the students need to demonstrate or develop in their papers, but omit specific details (topic, stance, style, voice, etc.) in order to force students to make important developmental decisions about their own writings.

Most importantly, we must actually teach students this philosophy of writing assignments so they understand why assignments are constructed in this manner. Students
must be taught to view writing assignment sheets not as a contract for a grade, but as a guide to knowledge and critical thinking. Not only will this make the writing assignment interesting for the student, but instructors will receive papers that accomplish the goals of summary, analysis, argument, etc. but yet are diverse, challenging, creative, and interesting to read.
PROBLEMS WITH WRITING ASSIGNMENT SHEETS

The assignment sheets often used by college instructors in first-year composition courses typically delineate what task the students’ papers should fulfill, but when the writing assignment sheet includes unclear wording, insufficient examples or analogies, poor organization of assignment tasks (whether the student should be summarizing, analyzing, synthesizing, arguing, etc.), or poor visual design, the students have difficulty understanding what task their papers should accomplish, leaving open the opportunity for divergent interpretation. Poorly written writing assignment sheets can lead to poorly written student papers. If the instructor is left with responses to assignments according to the various interpretations and therefore papers that answer different questions or achieve different goals, some sort of clarification or better explanation of the assignment needs to be made. Obviously, a better solution would be to write an assignment sheet that minimizes the need of clarification.

Gaps in the Current Literature on Writing Assignments

College instructors in first-year composition courses often develop formal descriptions for individual writing assignments. Resources for designing these assignment sheets generally incorporate instructors’ concerns (a clear thesis statement, well-incorporated supporting sources, an understanding of a given genre of writing, etc.), as in Linda Simon’s, “The Papers We Want to Read.” But few investigate students’ concerns and what students
feel may help them better understand the assignment. The literature review of this thesis discusses numerous articles that outline what instructors believe should be included in writing assignment sheets, what topics or tasks should be avoided in writing assignments, and what benefits instructors gain from employing such ideas. But few examine what concerns the students have when faced with a given assignment. Also, many of the “conclusions” these articles reach conflict with the findings of other articles. Because instructors need to make sure the students understand the materials presented, gathering actual student concerns and feedback would seem essential in determining the effectiveness of writing assignment sheets.

At Iowa State University, I have witnessed students’ apprehension about writing assignments in my own classes and other instructors’ classes (thanks to my experiences working in a writing center, where I helped students from many different classes with different assignment sheets and different questions and problems) due to misunderstanding the instructor’s intended assignment. Even in the writing assignments I have given so far in my two semesters of teaching freshman composition courses, I have had to answer numerous questions clarifying my intended assignments. Misunderstandings of the concepts of an assignment (as in rhetorical analysis, the audience, purpose, and context that affect the development of an argument and its inclusion of logos, ethos, or pathos) might require additional instruction, but misunderstandings of the writing assignment itself could be clarified by understanding student concerns about writing assignments. Despite the various differing theories expressed in current literature, I do not believe current research is sufficient
to develop writing assignments that apply to First-Year Composition courses with the goals such as those in my own classes (which I will discuss later).

**Origin of This Study**

Talking with my mentor—the experienced instructor under whom I studied, in order to get ideas and support for teaching my classes—before my first semester of teaching, we decided what types of assignments I was going to give my students. One of the things she mentioned was how students didn’t particularly like the summary assignment. There were various reasons: the students had written a million summaries up to this point in school; writing a summary was neither interesting nor challenging; the students felt it was busy-work with no practical application; etc. I asked her about assigning an abstract instead, showing the practical application to writing articles in their respective fields, and having the students eventually write an abstract of their argument papers. She really liked the idea, and so did I, so I tried it. I provided the class with an assignment sheet (Appendix A), as well as examples of a summary and an abstract (which, I admit, are by no means exceptional, and are quite exaggerated in their length and conciseness, respectively), in order to further explain the assignment.

Despite my efforts, the resulting papers were not what I had hoped for. Instead of abstracts, I basically received very short summaries. Papers included lengthy and multiple quotations; paragraph-by-paragraph summations, where each sentence in the “abstract” was a
summary of its corresponding paragraph in the article; and little focus on the theme of the article (that which I did get was extremely generic).

One student in my study commented specifically on the abstract assignment: “I didn't understand exactly what the assignment [to write an abstract of the article] was and subsequently wrote about the wrong topic [a summary of the article].” I initially thought the student was completely in the wrong; in my mind, she simply hadn't looked at the directions closely enough to understand that the summary information included was there to show the differences between abstracts and summaries. After a lot of research, conferencing with my major professor, and numerous class discussions in my composition theory courses, I began to question the validity of the assignment and my own teaching abilities. However, my thesis research has illuminated more important issues behind the development of writing assignment sheets than my initial study focused on.

I began this study intending to investigate how to create writing assignment sheets that minimized the need for clarification; but the feedback I received highlighted what I feel to be more important issues than just the creation of the writing assignment sheet itself. Finding ways to allow students to hold authorship and personal investment in writing, maximize the students’ cognitive development through a writing assignment, and minimize the effect of students’ and instructors’ differing interpretations of writing tasks and writing assignment sheets would benefit my writing assignments and my students more than developing a more aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly assignment sheet.
Because students are still having difficulties with writing assignments, we need to re-examine the theories of writing assignment development, possibly supplementing the development process with student feedback or ideas generated from students’ concerns.

**First-Year Composition at Iowa State University**

First-Year Composition (English 104 and English 105) is required for students in all majors at Iowa State University. Some students test out of English 104, due to high ACT scores, GPA, or entrance/placement exam performance. Students generally take these courses during their first year, but classes can have sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Because composition courses are required and not directly related to many students’ courses of study, I have often overheard students express opinions that First-Year Composition is “pointless” or “useless” or “has nothing to do with my major.” Many of my students have thought composition courses should be formulaic: instructors should present the students with the “correct” way to write, and students should then learn this process and receive a grade according to their ability to merely mimic the instructor’s ideas. Students do not always understand that no single “formula” exists for writing; an introduction to an analysis can serve an entirely different purpose than an introduction to an argument. They want composition courses to be taught like a math or science course, where knowing the correct formulas will yield the correct answer and grant them their “A.”

The Iowa State English Department includes in the intended goals for English 105, the course in which this study was conducted, learning to analyze texts, develop arguments, and
use and cite sources in a paper ("Bulletin"). When I present these goals to my classes, I emphasize the need to think critically: in order to create an argument, they must first analyze other arguments to determine what makes them effective or not. Students need to understand how other arguments are created and evaluate them, so they will know how to create their own effective arguments.

**Student Profiles**

Of my fifty students, most could be classified as traditional, white, middle-class, Mid-westerners with moderately conservative, somewhat-sheltered views, and a lack of exposure to diversity. Each of my two classes had one international student, and one class also had a non-traditional student who was a working mother; a few students from each class were from regions other than the Midwest. The views generally expressed in class were dualistic, sometimes multiplistic (Battaglini), usually looking at controversial issues as having pro- and con- arguments, with no middle ground, contextuality, or other complexity of the issues discussed in class.

From the feedback I received from my thesis research, as well as the comments students made in class, I presumed their prior experiences with composition had not challenged them to generate their own original arguments as much as report on the stances of existing arguments. Many of the students viewed "English class" as a place where they are required to report on or summarize an author's article rather than respond to or critique the article. Students felt they were expected to learn "the basics" of English (spelling, grammar,
and the “correct” method of constructing a paper). Some were resistant to the freedom of being able to—or more accurately, required to—create their own method, style, and arguments; this became quite apparent in my research and has greatly influenced the way I present my philosophy on the “correct” method of writing.

Overall, I built a good rapport with both of the composition classes describe in this study. Because this was my first semester teaching Freshman Composition, I began the semester presenting myself as an authority figure, generally strict, serious with a slight sense of humor, dressing in corporate casual attire, without much disclosure of my own personal life. A couple weeks into the semester, I began feeling more comfortable fulfilling the role of teacher-as-a-resource and loosened up on the teacher-as-the-authority-figure. After about three to four weeks of class, and having read their sitcom comparison papers (an assignment requiring the students to compare themselves to TV sitcom characters, serving as a basic diagnostic paper as well as a way to get to know a bit of their personalities), I began to learn the individual personalities of my students and to let them see my personality as well.

My Writing Assignment Sheets Prior to This Study

My graduate coursework has included diverse instruction in writing assignment design. All new teaching assistants are required to take a course in pedagogy, “Teaching English Composition.” In the course, students study the objectives of Iowa State University’s First-Year Composition program, current pedagogical theory, teaching and evaluating writing, and practical skills such as developing lesson plans and writing
assignments. In addition to this course, I have opted to take two other courses in pedagogy: “Teaching Business and Technical Writing” and “Teaching Composition: Theory and Research.” The technical writing course required students to plan and develop the course curriculum, teaching materials, and writing assignments for a technical writing course; the composition theory course allowed me to investigate pedagogical issues in the development of good writing assignments.

My own classroom experiences with students who were unclear about my writing assignments and my tutorial experiences in a writing center, working with students who had concerns about their writing assignment sheets, have further influenced the way I designed my writing assignment sheets. Students brought in writing assignment sheets that ranged from a two- to three-line question originating from a textbook, containing vague and generic instruction, to a four-page delineation of how to gather the research, structure paragraphs, arrange the data, and construct the argument. Thus I developed the (pre-research project) writing assignment sheets seen in Appendixes A, B, and C, considering such experiences as:

- the broad range of writing assignment sheet styles I observed in my writing center experiences
- students’ frustration with both open-ended and constricting guidelines—students I tutored in the writing center as well as students in my own classes
- my training in pedagogy and assignment design
- course instruction specifically about teaching First-Year Composition
- suggestions from other instructors who taught First-Year Composition
One of the most significant influences on the way I developed my writing assignment sheets was my inexperience at classroom teaching. For my first semester of teaching, I felt it necessary to be as detailed as possible in my assignment sheets in order that there be specific, clear, indisputable documentation that outlined exactly what I expected of students’ writing. I also felt it necessary for me to justify these requirements in my writing assignment sheets, so I included my reasoning for why students were required to address certain issues within their papers, relating these reasons to my intended educational goals for the students. I developed my writing assignment sheets with four major sections:

- **Assignment**—a one- or two-sentence description of the writing assignment’s basic task
- **Details**—a more complete description of the writing assignment, discussing the areas the students should focus on when writing the paper, concepts to be incorporated in the given assignment, possible brief examples of these concepts and how to incorporate them into a paper, etc.
- **Purpose**—my intended educational goals for the assignments, usually what the students should be learning through the development of a particular writing assignment
- **Evaluation**—a brief description (not as a checklist or rubric) of the grading criteria I used in grading students’ papers, highlighting basic concepts students are supposed to incorporate into their papers
Choosing a Writing Assignment

Originally, I wanted design a research study to gather data (student feedback and questions concerning the writing assignment sheet) about the rhetorical analysis assignment because it is problematic for both students (who have difficulty understanding the concepts of rhetorical analysis) and instructors (who have difficulty teaching rhetorical analysis concepts to their students). Contributing useful research on teaching rhetorical analysis was especially interesting to me because I had recently taken a pedagogy course with other graduate students who would also become First-Year Composition instructors, students who had many concerns about teaching rhetorical analysis.

However, some difficulties in understanding a rhetorical analysis writing assignment are not associated with the writing assignment itself, but with the concepts involved with rhetorical analysis; and my interest in this particular study required me to limit student concerns not associated specifically with the actual writing assignment sheet. Since students generally understand the concepts associated with argumentative writing better than those surrounding rhetorical analysis, I decided to gather their concerns about the argumentative research paper writing assignment. Concerns about the concepts involved in the assignment would be somewhat minimized, and I could focus more closely on student concerns with the writing assignment sheet itself.
Research Objective

In my research, I originally hoped to identify the student problems that fall into the category I labeled clarification, rewording or rephrasing a poorly worded or underdeveloped writing assignment. Clarification problems would generally be those that could be minimized through complete and correct phrasing or organization of the assignment and possibly through understanding students' concerns. Once I gathered the writing assignment sheet concerns from my students, I planned to analyze the information and incorporate it into my actual writing assignment sheet for their last written paper. Thus, I used gathered feedback about the revised sheet to determine whether I effectively addressed students' concerns.

Though I did gather some responses that demonstrated students' clarification concerns with writing assignment sheets, the data I collected offered more input as to what types of things students felt were important to include in writing assignment sheets. Those responses that did address clarification issues seemed more to focus on students' concerns about understanding concepts of a writing assignment rather than poor articulation of that writing task in the assignment sheet.

I am somewhat glad, even excited, that my research has taken such an unanticipated turn. As a result, however, my previously established classifications became less significant in the analysis of my data; instead I developed a different structure for categorizing my students' responses, as seen in the data analysis section in Chapter 4. My research highlighted issues of authorship, cognitive development, and interpretations of writing
assignments more than methods of clarifying writing assignment sheets, so I gathered literature that related more to my data and re-focused the objective of my study.

**Research Question**

Many contextual issues influenced the development of my study: the goals of first-year composition courses as designed by the Iowa State University English Department, the central focus I place on critical thinking in my courses, the students' expectations of what composition courses should entail, and the feedback I collected from my students. Initially, I wanted to understand how to develop better writing assignment sheets so the written explanation itself (in terms of layout, visual design, key concepts, level of detail of the assignment, etc.) would be clear to students.

After analyzing student feedback from my study, my focus shifted. I decided to concentrate more on developing writing assignments that would allow students authorship over their own writing, hopefully increasing their interest and commitment in their writing. I wanted to generate writing assignments that were clear in their expectations so students wouldn't feel as though they had misinterpreted the writing assignments. Most importantly, I wanted to break students of their expectations that composition should have formulas, that there is only one correct way to write, that—unless they write "the way the instructor wanted them to write"—their style of writing is wrong. My data led me to my new research question: How could student feedback help me develop better writing assignment sheets for
my composition courses that allow students authorship, challenge students, and minimize unintended interpretation?

This is a colossal task I've set before myself, and it will be a long time before I arrive at an "answer." But attempting to achieve these goals has helped me develop my writing assignments for my own composition courses: I constantly change the way I present my students' writing assignments according to feedback I receive from them so I can better relate my writing assignments to them. The research from this study has helped me create writing assignments that challenge students while allowing them the freedom to develop papers in a direction of interest while still adhering to the goals of First-Year Composition. This research could certainly be adopted by other teachers of English 105 at Iowa State, or even by instructors of other universities, whose First-Year Composition goals seek to strengthen students' ability to write analytical and argumentative papers.
Minimal research has been done regarding student concerns about writing assignment sheets. Understanding how students interpret writing assignment sheets and how they would choose to develop their own assignments could yield great improvements in our writing assignments. I’m not advocating completely replacing our current philosophies with those developed by students, but that we use such researched insights into student thought processes to improve our existing writing assignment sheets. The existing body of research on the development of writing assignments could be supplemented by student feedback that traces the thought process as a student receives and reviews a writing assignment sheet, asks students what components of writing assignment sheets they feel are important to understanding the assignment, and asks students how they would develop their own writing assignments.

To eventually be able to classify the concerns of my students, I highlighted the following controversial areas I found most frequently in composition theory articles addressing writing assignment concerns:

- **Authorship**—defined as control over the ideas and development of a paper.
- **Interpretation of the Writing Assignment Sheet**—understanding how knowledge, experiences, and context affect the way the assignment sheet is understood by both student and instructor.
• **Role of the Writing Assignment Sheet**—the function the writing assignment sheet should serve in a student’s writing process.

• **Cognitive Development**—how well the assignment challenges the student to think critically and stimulates intellectual growth, which includes the following subdivisions:
  - Development of Critical Thinking Skills—how well does the assignment develop critical thinking skills?
  - Focus on the Task or Learning—does the student view the assignment as a test or development of his/her knowledge?
  - Use of Examples and Assignment Detail—do the details or examples complete the task for the students, thus minimizing the possibility for learning through the assignment?

Separating the issues that determine the effectiveness of a writing assignment is a difficult task. For example, investigating the effect a grading rubric has on a writing assignment may not only introduce the differences between process- and product-oriented writing, but may intersect issues of authorship. The rubric would dictate the structure of the paper as well as the effectiveness of the writing assignment’s stimulation of cognitive development because such restrictions would construct portions of the paper for students. Therefore, some of the examples from current literature may be discussed in more than one section; and when I analyze my own data, some responses may provide insight into students’ concerns about more than one issue.
The order in which the issues appear is mainly determined by their relationship to one another; these issues build upon each other, so they are presented as such to provide necessary foundational information for each other as well as minimize redundancy. For example, when the instructor provides excessive information in a writing assignment sheet, minimizing student authorship, the writing assignment sheet becomes a pre-constructed outline for the student and does not challenge the student to exercise critical thinking skills. The issues identified above build upon one another, leading to the ultimate goal, students’ cognitive development.

Authorship

If we provide too much structure in our assignment sheets, students will not feel as though they have any control over their writing, and therefore, no reason to have personal investment in their papers. Jennie Nelson examines the assignment sheet established for a sociology paper (titled “Social Influences”) in a class she observes, showing guidelines that structure the assignment for the students to such an extent that the students are no longer the authors of the piece of writing, but merely information gatherers who plug their data into the instructor’s pre-existing outline. The outline entirely describes the instructor’s preferences for the paper, consisting of seven detailed steps that generate for the students all of the critical questions in the development of the paper. James Marshall discusses a similar occurrence in a classroom he observed in which “the assignment sheet [was] so highly structured...that the direction of the students’ arguments has been virtually predetermined”
When instructors provide such detailed instruction, they may eliminate the student from the writing process. The assignment is no longer the development of a student’s argument, but the student’s generation of the instructor’s argument.

Nelson presents one student’s concerns about the writing assignment sheet, “‘feeling as if we’re being graded on how well we can follow directions, not how we think on our own’” (378) because he felt “obliged to follow” the guidelines rather than develop his own structure for the writing assignment (378). Despite the fact that a number of students in this sociology class had requested an assignment sheet to “lessen the ambiguity” of the writing task, such detailed structure doesn’t just clarify the assignment, it removes the student-as-author entirely from the writing process, except possibly for sentence-level structuring (378).

We need to make sure our writing assignment sheets present the students with an opportunity to write their papers, not ours.

Sharon Pianko claims that students feel “writing for school is something which must be done for others,” (11) so “there is little investment commitment to it on the student’s part” (11); and her research findings show that “students do not view writing which has the context specifically set by the teacher and which must be completed within the constraints of a class meeting as an activity that is worth committing themselves to” (17). While her research gathers data quantitatively and does not explain why students feel this way, there is clearly evidence showing students not only want the freedom to choose their own topics, but that they also feel formatting and submission guidelines—page length, font size, margin
width, due date, etc.—limit their writing. Both of these infringements lessen the students’ investment in their writing, so both types of restriction should be eliminated.

Despite students’ concerns about authorship, Linda Simon advocates heavily structured writing assignments that provide students with many concrete details such as the list of criteria the instructor uses to evaluate the students’ papers. Refuting the argument that providing students with such information does the work for them, she claims “[t]he burning question students bring to an assignment is ‘What does the teacher want?’ And they have a right to know” (6). Simon believes that an extensive level of detail in a writing assignment sheet explains to students what instructors expect to see in a paper, which is necessary for fairness. Providing students with such level of detail not only answers students, telling them “what we want,” but also yields papers that we will find more interesting to read, since the papers will clearly be closer to the intended response to a particular writing assignment.

However, while Simon seeks to guide her students to write “The Papers We Want to Read,” by including this level of detail, she neglects students’ concerns about the papers they want to write. Keeping our writing assignment sheets focused on only the necessary concepts or genres will allow students to maintain control of and interest in their papers.

**Interpretation of the Writing Assignment Sheet**

While concepts and writing tasks may prove difficult to students, various studies have shown that actual wording of writing assignments has little bearing on student performance. George Brossell and Barbara Hoetker Ash investigated the effect of wording on
students' comprehension of a writing task, finding that changes in the wording of the assignment sheet did not affect the students' performance on the assignment. The changes in the assignment wording included variances of presenting the task as a personal address or neutral address, each divided equally between prompting the writing assignment with a question or an imperative (423). Studying the effect of wording on essay exam questions, Alice Brand's research shows that "[it takes] substantial change in the test question to produce palpable change in written response" (16). She does, however, argue for succinct and direct questions: "The more words in a test essay prompt, the more semantic relationships students must negotiate, and the greater the risk of misunderstanding" (14). So these studies would conclude that while the particular words we include in our writing assignment sheets may not affect the interpretation, the number of words could complicate the process of interpreting the writing assignment.

Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy believe a writing assignment has three stages: the creation of the writing assignment task, the interpretation of that task by the student, and the assessment of the students' responses to the writing assignment task (413–6). Ideally, the task itself would be interpreted identically at each of these stages; but different focuses or values on important components of the writing assignment and different stages of cognitive development may cause students to interpret writing assignments differently than instructors intend (416–21). And when students and instructors possess different knowledge and experiences, as was the case in the responses in my research, the students have no basis from which to construct an interpretation of the writing task.
Eric Hobson argues that students must determine three things when faced with the challenge of a writing assignment sheet: the stated and non-stated (the instructor's own "pet peeves" he/she focuses on or requires) writing assignment requirements; a process or strategy for accomplishing the particular writing task; and, how the instructor will grade the writing assignment (52). When this is compounded with the need to define and understand the concepts presented in the writing assignment, the real writing task can become unintelligible to the student. Therefore, we must ensure that our writing assignment sheets do not introduce new, unfamiliar concepts, without having discussed this new knowledge in class; rather, we should challenge students to further develop their understanding of previously discussed concepts.

Prior experiences and knowledge influence the way students interpret writing assignment sheets. Jan Nespor argues:

Tasks are not simply imposed or provided by some outside force. Rather, people have to define them, formulate goals for them, determine the relevant constraints, and identify resources available in the setting. In such situations, then, academic tasks will consist in part of discovering, creating, or interpreting goals, objects, operators, and constraints—and these processes are as much social-interactional as psychological. Thus different student performances may stem from differences in knowledge and effort or from different understandings and definitions of the task. (204 emphasis hers)

So when an instructor receives from a student a low-quality paper or a paper responding to an unintended interpretation of the writing assignment, lack of effort or intelligence may not be the root of this dilemma; the student may have created a paper that he or she thinks addresses the instructor's assignment sheet quite well.
George Posner also believes this interpretation determines the extent to which the students actually learn from a writing assignment (343). Since these prior experiences, then, have such an impact on the students' learning capability, the key to successful assignment design lies within the understanding of not only the students' prior knowledge, but also the relationship between their interpretations and the instructor's presented task. A student may actually understand the material presented while misunderstanding the writing assignment itself, causing the instructor to believe the student does not actually grasp the material presented (349).

**Role of the Writing Assignment Sheet**

If the assignment sheets themselves are not looked at as part of the writing and learning process, students may write papers that do not demonstrate nor develop their understanding of the concepts of a particular paper. Not only do we need to ensure that our interpretations of a writing assignment coincide as closely as possible with our students' interpretations, but we must also be sure our students understand the role of the writing assignment sheet. Nelson discusses her research participants' attitudes toward the writing assignment sheets they received: one student wrote his paper "from the top of [his] head" (375) and only consulted the writing assignment sheet when he "got stuck in his writing," (375) while another student only looked at the writing assignment sheet "if she did not have anything to say," (377) implying that the students did not view the assignment sheet as an actual part of the writing process, but as additional help for those who needed it.
However, the assignment sheet Nelson’s research subjects were using for their “Social Influences” papers consisted of a detailed, seven-step outline for the paper (393). When this much information is provided to the students, the writing assignment sheet no longer serves as a challenge for the student to develop their writing and an understanding of their topic; it becomes the structure of their papers, merely calling for students to plug their data into the pre-existing framework.

Hobson argues that one way to minimize the discrepancies between student and instructor interpretations of a writing assignment is to include the students in the development of assessment tools for peer review, which then, refined by the instructor into a rubric, also become the grading criteria for the assignment (54-7). While this may give students a sense of ownership over not only their papers, but the assignment as well (at least the evaluate section), generating and including a rubric such as this transforms the writing assignment sheet into a checklist for the paper rather than a stimulus to write.

**Cognitive Development**

*Development of Critical Thinking Skills*

Writing assignments that don’t challenge students do not provide them an opportunity to learn and develop their critical thinking skills. In her observation of the sociology class and the “Social Influences” assignment, Nelson shows how the heavily structured assignment sheet eliminated the students’ need to develop what we as English instructors would deem an *acceptable* writing process—working through the stages of
brainstorming, researching/information gathering, planning/outlining, drafting/revising—and allowed them to procrastinate and “circumvent the thinking and learning processes” (366) without the need for their own critical thinking because “the guidelines served as a sort of paper generator” (377), shifting the students’ writing concerns from the actual concepts of the paper to merely fulfilling the submission requirements; one student “stopped writing when he had produced enough words to fulfill the length requirement” (377).

Pianko might argue this shortcutting process occurs because “perhaps [his] sense of completion is synonymous with the thought that [he has] met the requirements of the assignment, and not that [he has] met the requirements of a full exploration of the topic for [his] own gratification and sense of accomplishment” (12). By placing these submission requirements on a writing assignment, the students no longer concern themselves with understanding the concepts of the paper or developing their writing process, but with the fulfillment of trivial requirements of a writing task. And when these submission requirements become the focus of the students’ writing, the task no longer furthers their cognitive development. Only when they are required to “exercise high-level thinking . . . relative to their own stage of development” (Lindeman 69) does learning occur. Therefore we need to eliminate such meticulous requirements from our writing assignment sheets so students will focus on concepts, thus developing their critical thinking skills.

According to John McClymer and Kenneth Moynihan, writing assignment sheets should include “enough clues about the nature of the inquiry”—in other words, should detail the genre and goals of the assignment, but not dictate the specific writing process—in order
that students can then develop their own writing through their own critical analysis and examination of their topic (369). This level of guidance provides them with enough understanding of the goals of the assignment and the instructor’s “intended” assignment, yet requires the student to generate the unifying factors of their paper, investigate the topic, and create their own interpretation and insight into the material.

At a certain point providing students with this kind of highly structured project [one that elaborately details the minute components of a writing assignment] becomes counterproductive. Our students enter our classes as dependent participants and so our ultimate goal has to be toward helping them achieve intellectual independence. (370)

Heavily structured writing assignment sheets do not benefit the students because they don’t help the students achieve “intellectual independence”; instead, students remain “dependent participants” in writing assignments and in their own writing. Elimination of this precise detail from the writing assignment sheets develops students’ critical thinking. Marshall would agree with this position: “If a task is too heavily structured, the opportunity for students to stretch their present [critical thinking] abilities may be lost” (156).

Despite these benefits of stimulating students’ critical thinking, Walter Doyle argues that “indirect methods” of teaching—his definition focusing on the students’ self-discovery of knowledge and the creation of their own hypotheses concerning a particular subject material—not only allow students to develop incorrect or unreliable solutions to understanding material, but also favor higher-ability students because of their aptitude for higher-level thinking (177). This argument can be applied to writing assignments themselves, since open-ended or vague assignment sheets would require the students to generate their own
critical analysis of the writing task and therefore execute higher-level thinking, so lower-ability students would become frustrated with such ambiguity, due to their lesser ability to perform such abstract thinking. Therefore, Doyle would argue for the inclusion of complete, concrete, directing instruction in writing assignment sheets.

While I agree with Doyle that instructors should ensure their students, if taught by self-discovery, construct proper solutions to understand material, such guidance should only be implemented on the conceptual or theoretical level. Obviously we should ensure students properly understand the theories behind our teachings, but trial-and-error methods of learning are valuable in the sense that they provide students with wrong answers to material with the opportunity to understand why such a solution fails. As long as we ensure the student does not permanently adopt an improper solution to a given material, the student can learn a lot from his or her experiences, correct or incorrect. In terms of writing assignments, instructors should ensure that students grasp the concepts to be employed in a paper, but students also have the responsibility for their own education. When a student is unsure of his or her comprehension of a concept in a writing assignment, he or she must approach the instructor for amplification of the concept or the writing assignment.

Focus on the Task or Learning

Hobson’s process of involving students in the creation of a grading rubric creates a checklist with which the students can evaluate their papers; Nelson reports that the instructor she observed provided the students with a complete outline that described each of
the seven steps the instructor wanted the students to take and report on. While this may give
the students a good understanding of what components need to be present in their papers,
this checklist of parts shifts the students' focus from the understanding of how the
components should fit together because that is already provided for them. The students'
focus, then, is centered on fulfilling these seemingly individual tasks rather than developing a
cohesive document and understanding how and why the components of the paper relate to
each other.

Other experiences that point to the students' focus on task rather than learning occur
in both Nelson's and Pianko's studies. Nelson reports that one of the students she observed
“focused on the product requirements (length and format) to define and complete the
assignment and failed to engage in many of the [research and study development] processes
[for the paper]” (374); he stopped writing when he had fulfilled the length requirement of the
paper (377). Similarly, Pianko's study showed:

Some students counted words at intervals during the writing to see how many
additional words they would need, and this determined how much more they would
include in the essay. For a few students, the addition of a conclusion was determined
by whether or not the word limit had been met. (10)

When the formatting requirements supersede the importance of the learning objectives of the
writing assignment and, as seen with these examples, dictate the actual amount of content and
development of the students' ideas, actual learning cannot possibly occur for the students. If
we wish for our students to learn through our writing assignments, we must eliminate their
focus on such requirements and, therefore, eliminate such material from our writing
assignment sheets.
Use of Examples and Assignment Detail

Because Doyle believes that abstract teaching (and abstract writing assignment sheets) allows students to develop improper methods of coping with learning tasks, he would argue that assignment sheets should include explicit detail to ensure as little misinterpretation—an interpretation not closely related to the instructor’s intended assignment—as possible. Likewise Hobson, because he includes his students in the generation of his grading rubric for the purpose of ensuring this common interpretation of the writing assignment expectations, would most likely agree with the idea of developing highly-structured writing assignment sheets. Linda Simon, too, argues for detailed writing assignment sheets to provide the students with what the instructor wants included in a writing assignment. However, different research studies from Nelson, Pianko, Marshall, McClymer and Moynihan and others have shown the problems with including excessive detail: student frustration, lack of student investment in his/her writing, circumvented learning processes, and minimized cognitive development.

In a study investigating the interpretation of writing assignments by novice and advanced writers, Linda Flower and John Hayes claim that writers who read often have a much larger sampling of texts and therefore understand different possible methods of responding to a writing assignment (28). Because of the many examples of numerous genres of writing, advanced writers then can draw from their experiences with other writings and incorporate those writings’ strategies into their own writing. Novice writers, however, have a
smaller sampling, and therefore can only incorporate a limited number of techniques into their writing. So there is a difference between the way advanced and novice writers use examples when they write. Advanced writers use their examples as possible ways to develop a writing task or form a hybrid between numerous examples to create a writing. Novice writers, however, may not have examples of a particular writing genre in mind, so, when provided with an example, may deduce this to be the "correct" format of the genre, thus restricting their authorship, exploration of the issue outside the format provided by the example, and their cognitive development.

_Learning Style Differences and Stages of Thinking_

George Jensen applies the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to the understanding of students' writing processes and their concerns regarding writing assignments. Personality types can indicate possible preferences for different levels of abstractness, structure, and detail in writing assignments. Because tailoring writing assignments to coincide with certain learning styles can frustrate or alienate students with different learning styles, Jensen suggests options for students that would appeal to different students' personalities. However, despite the inclusiveness of variations in writing assignment structure, he acknowledges the difficulty of adapting the classroom (and indirectly, writing assignments) to every students' learning style. We must also avoid the urge to classify students and expect that certain personality types will always respond best to certain ways of teaching. Rather than expect certain students to respond well to certain forms of teaching, studies investigating Myers-
Briggs personality types can be incorporated into our writing assignments as possible ways any student could understand a writing assignment.

Adapting our classes to accommodate certain personality types may lessen students’ cognitive development due to the lack of challenge to the thought processes with which they are comfortable. “Exposing [students] to a wide variety of teaching styles, some argue, helps students to develop in ways that they could not if only exposed to the one teaching style that is compatible with their learning style (Partridge, 1983)” (188). So, one way cognitive development occurs is from the challenging of students’ thinking processes through diverse teaching styles (or writing assignments) that do not necessarily coincide with their own learning styles. The context of my classes—the focus on the development of critical thinking skills—requires these challenges to students’ preferred thought processes.

Dennis Battaglini and Randolph Schenkat discuss the theories of Perry and Toulmin, introducing their article with a narrative showing instructors’ frustration with students who miss the critical thinking objectives of their courses because of a desire to be programmed with information rather than actually learn for themselves. Critical thinking requires students to abandon dualistic or multiplistic thinking for relativism. However, acceptance of Perry’s model “assumes that relativism is the most desirable intellectual stance and perhaps an end in itself” (2). But relativistic thinking does examine issues from multiple viewpoints, so relativism can at least be assumed to be a necessary part of critical thinking, even if not accepted as the highest level of thinking.
Need for Additional Research

The central issue within the current literature is the level of detail instructors should include in a writing assignment sheet. Student authorship is limited by increased levels of detail, as is students' opportunity for cognitive development. When excessive assignment details or examples are included in the writing assignment sheet, some of the critical thinking is done for the student. However, the inclusion of detail does keep students from producing writings that stray from the instructor's intended assignment. Deviant interpretations of the assignment are minimized by the inclusion of this detail; students need only perform the desired writing task, rather than interpret the task, which allows for a possibly-incorrect interpretation of the writing assignment sheet.

Because of the discrepancies between the theorists' arguments, the numerous implications these discrepancies have on writing assignments, and the minimal understanding of students' concerns about writing assignments, current theory needs to be supplemented with student insight. Gathering information such as students' expectations of writing assignment sheets, their preferences for particular assignments, their evaluations of writing assignments, their past experiences with both productive and problematic writing assignments, how they view the role of the assignments sheet, and how students would construct a writing assignment would provide researchers and instructors with a crucial perspective of the writing assignments we create.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gathering Data from My Students

Because I was teaching two sections of First-Year Composition, and I had certainly experienced some concerns with writing assignment sheets, I had access to a large body of research subjects who could provide me with student concerns that I would be able to contextualize due to my understanding of students’ personalities through our semester-long interactions in class. Jennie Nelson reports that much of the research investigating composition issues occurs in the context of a research study rather than the natural setting of the classroom. She argues that class relationships formed through peer conferencing, substantive feedback from instructors on other writing assignments, and overall classroom dynamics are crucial influences on student work (364-5). Had I gathered data from a composition course in which I was not involved, I would not have the understanding of personalities and dispositions toward composition that I have of my former students.

I developed a worksheet for students to fill out with their top three concerns about writing assignment sheets and distributed it as a homework assignment in which they were required to respond to three of the seven possible questions. Nelson also argues that work for which students are held accountable is more likely to generate more complete responses (365); therefore, I required the actual assignment be completed by all of my students for a grade. Accompanying the homework assignment was an authorization form that they were
supposed to sign, either granting or denying me the privilege of using their responses in my thesis research.

To introduce my thesis research, I initiated a class discussion about writing assignment sheets. Each class discussed the importance of understanding the way assignment sheets were designed and why certain elements were included or excluded from the writing assignment sheet, and how this understanding would ultimately lead to better productivity on their part. Once the discussion ended, I handed out the homework assignment and discussed the instructions.

**Data Gathering Tools**

The combination of questions I developed were designed to yield responses from my students that were influenced as little as possible by the phrasing of the question. I wanted to leave the questions open-ended so that the students’ responses would not reflect persuasive wording in the questions I posed. The questions were presented with the option for the student to designate whether the response given reflected an experience in a high-school or college course, in a writing or non-writing course. I wanted to not restrict their responses so I could understand what their greatest concerns with writing assignments were, not just what their greatest concerns with writing assignments in my class were.

I also wanted the questions to gather responses that provided information about student concerns at different levels of thinking. For example, many of the questions are designed such that a student’s response could provide information about detail-oriented
concerns: misspellings or grammatical errors; discussion of problems at the word-level, sentence-level, or paragraph-level; vagueness or ambiguity at any of these levels. I did not dictate what concerns they should have, but allowed them to determine which level or area of interest was important to examine with any particular question.

Assuming some students may prefer different styles of writing, I presented some of the questions in a question-answer format that searches for a concrete (though not guided) answer, in case a student would like to provide a less abstract idea about his/her concerns about writing assignment sheets; others are more open-ended, allowing students to answer with an interpretation of the question that is interesting or important to him/her (which ultimately proved quite interesting to me as well); while others even ask for students to provide a brief narration that portrays their concerns.

The questions, with individual goals or reasoning for their inclusion, follow:

_Think of all of the writing assignments you have had and write about either the best or the worst writing assignment. What made this assignment good or bad? How was it easy or difficult to understand?_

This question allows the student to recount any writing assignment he/she feels strongly about but, more importantly, requires him/her to identify the components of that assignment that contributed to the student’s feelings about the sheet. Information gathered from this question would allow me to investigate general impressions students have of writing
assignment sheets so I could determine which components, styles, organizations, etc. contribute to the development of an effective writing assignment.

*Describe your thought process when you get a writing assignment sheet. How do you read the sheet? What do you look for first? What do you think is most important?*

I wanted to allow students to simply narrate their thought process as they read through a writing assignment sheet, also providing me with what the student values in an assignment sheet. Not only did this question allow me to learn what information students feel I should include in my writing assignment sheets, but I also know how they read it and in what order, so I can arrange the information accordingly. I did not restrict the context to a writing assignment sheet in my class in case they read differently because of other instructors’ writing assignment sheets that incorporate components I should consider in my own assignment sheets.

*What problems have you seen with writing assignment sheets in the past? What do you think could have been done to fix these problems?*

This question gathers some similar data to question one, but it focuses on writing assignment sheets that students feel were unsuccessful and requires them to provide their own ideas that they feel would alleviate the problems they experienced with assignment sheets. Having the students tell me with what they felt to be problematic in writing
assignment sheets, along with what they thought to be good solutions, provided me with understanding of what they valued in a “good” assignment sheet. Again, I did not restrict context to my class, this time, so students could address problems they struggled with, despite not having experienced that problem with one of my writing assignment sheets.

You are designing your own writing assignment sheet. How would you begin? You’ve seen what instructors include in assignment sheets, but what kinds of things would you include in or eliminate from your assignment sheet? Why?

I felt that not only would this question provide me with how and why students would design writing assignments in a particular manner, but that it would force them to consider writing assignments in a different way. Having to think about how they would construct an assignment sheet would cause them to understand the complexity of such a task: the need to construct a thought-provoking task, address the audience, stimulate learning, maintain interest, present the task clearly, etc. In their minds, they have formed opinions about why, as a student, they do or do not appreciate certain components of a writing assignment sheet; but this question forced them to consider the writing assignment as an instructor, so they would be able to generate the framework for an assignment sheet that would incorporate their student concerns.
Think of a time when you were given a writing assignment sheet but still didn't really understand what task you were supposed to accomplish in the assignment. Describe this experience and tell why you had problems understanding the writing assignment sheet.

Again focusing on problematic assignments, this question allows the student to offer a narrative that discusses his/her problems with a past writing assignment sheet; its open-ended nature allows the student to discuss macro- or micro-level problems with the assignment sheet.

Do you think the order of parts of an assignment sheet is important? If so, in what order would you include parts of the assignment and why would you pick this order? If not, why not?

Question two asked about the students' thought process, question four about students' development of their own assignment sheets, and both also revealed some information about the students' feelings on the importance of the order of (and inclusion of) components of an assignment sheet; but I wanted to directly ask about the order of components to see which they felt to be most important, or whether important information shouldn't necessarily be first. This question was important to determine whether the order of components actually affected their understanding of the writing assignment sheet, or if the order changed their interpretation of the assignment, due to the order of the components.
Have you ever had problems with an assignment sheet because of particular words on the sheet? Why did these words cause such a problem? (list the words if you can remember them)

This question simply investigates the students’ concerns for the level of vocabulary in writing assignment sheets, with the hopeful intent of substantive feedback on the problematic effects on students’ understanding a writing assignment sheet.

Procedure

Before distributing to my students an actual writing assignment sheet for their final paper, I asked them to provide me with their concerns about writing assignment sheets so that I could incorporate these concerns into a first draft of an assignment sheet for their final paper; they would then evaluate this draft of the assignment sheet, determining whether or not it was an improvement from previous writing assignment sheets and why, as well as whether or not I correctly assessed the concerns they included in their responses on my data collection worksheet. In this first data collection, I provided both sections with my worksheet (Appendix D). From the list of questions, I asked them to answer the three they felt to be most important or had the strongest opinion about in terms of writing assignment sheets and possible types of concerns, along with spaces where they were supposed to include their own thoughts about writing assignment sheets.
This first set of data is my primary data; these are the actual concerns of the students that I want to investigate in order to understand how to make my writing assignment sheets easier for students to understand.

Once I collected the data, I read through their responses briefly so that I could incorporate their suggestions into a newly designed writing assignment sheet (Appendix F). This first examination and incorporation of their responses into an actual writing assignment sheet did not examine every interesting aspect of their responses due to time constraints. I had less than a week after collecting the data to identify major and common concerns, and incorporate these concerns into a final writing assignment sheet. I was, however, able to find numerous similarities among responses and incorporate those into the writing assignment sheet for the argument paper.

To be certain that I understood my students’ concerns about writing assignment sheets, I incorporated their feedback into an actual writing assignment sheet and distributed it to them. My second collection of data was less of an actual data “collection” and more of a data verification, allowing me to determine whether or not I truly understood my students’ concerns gathered in my first data collection and had incorporated them correctly into their final writing assignment sheet. This data verification was gathered in class via oral discussion of the writing assignment sheet, analyzing a draft of a writing assignment sheet that incorporated their own concerns from the first collection of data.
DATA ANALYSIS AND CATEGORIZATION

I collected 144 responses from my students (forty-eight students, with three responses from each). As I read through the data, I labeled their responses with keywords or phrases that indicated the main point(s) of their responses. After an initial labeling of responses, I reviewed my categories to try to group similar responses according to my initial labels, so I could see how my students’ responses corresponded with the issues raised in the literature review. As with the literature review, many of the responses have multiple implications in my research—one response may address the issues of authorship, interpretation and cognitive development—so any one response could be analyzed multiple times in relation to literature review issues; others did not say anything significant or interesting to my particular research focus, and may have not have been included in the analysis.

Because of the qualitative nature of the study, not all 144 responses are analyzed; rather, I analyze the implications of issues that students raised a significant number of times (most often, more than a dozen times). In some instances, the students’ responses relate directly to issues raised in the literature review, as in the case of the students’ concern for writing-topic freedom, or authorship. In other instances, the students’ responses led me to gather more literature to compare to my results, as in the case of the students’ concern for a vocabulary level they understand.
It is also important to note that the frequency of occurrence in students’ responses is measured by the number of responses that include a particular concern, not by the number of students who have that concern. For example, out of the dozen responses that mention including samples in writing assignment sheets, three of them are from one student. The seven different questions were designed specifically to gather students’ concerns about writing assignment sheets without leading them toward any particular response, but they were also designed to gather different types of concerns. If a student found a way to appropriately answer three questions and incorporate his/her concern for the need of samples, I believe this series of responses shows not only his concern for this need for samples but also insight into his/her thought process and our understanding of his/her associations between different concepts within the questions and his justification of the need for samples. Therefore, it is legitimate to count those concerns more than once.

**General Overview of Students’ Responses**

**Writing Assignment Content**

When I use the term content, I am referring to the actual description of the writing assignment task in the writing assignment sheet. Forty-two of the responses make direct mention of the writing assignment sheet’s content. However, of the sixteen responses that compare the importance between the content and the length requirement and due date, only four feel including content information is more important than length and due date.
**Length and Due Date**

Thirty-two of the responses mentioned the importance of including the required length of the paper and the due date for the paper. Some of these responses directly address my assignment sheets prior to this study because, as discussed earlier, I did not include this information on my original assignment sheets. Twelve of these responses argue the length and due date to be more important than the actual content of the writing assignment itself, and sixteen do not mention the importance of the assignment sheet content.

**Inclusion of Specific Details and Examples**

Some students make a distinction between including content in the writing assignment sheet and including specific details, often wanting to know “exactly what [the teacher is] looking for” and wanting instructors to “clearly define exactly what needs to be included in the assignment.” Fifteen responses mention the need for such specific detail, and another twelve requested actual examples of writing assignment products.

**Writing Assignment Purpose**

The purpose of the writing assignment reflects the instructor’s rationale for giving the assignment; providing this information to students enlightens them as to why they are performing particular writing tasks as well as what they can learn from performing this task. Fifteen responses specifically mentioned writing assignment purpose, though only ten of them valued the purpose or would include purpose sections in their own writing assignments.
Presenting a Grading Scale or Rubric

Of the twenty-eight responses that discussed grading scales or rubrics, only one argued against the inclusion of rubrics in writing assignment sheets, claiming students would “only do the minimum work required for a particular grade.” Some of the other responses simply requested a brief explanation of the instructor’s expectations and grading method, while others wanted complete checklists of sub-level tasks that dictated exactly what students should write, which would also warrant a particular grade.

Order of Components in the Writing Assignment Sheet

Originally I wanted to examine whether or not the order of the sections of a writing assignment (such as the task description, writing assignment purpose, evaluation criteria, etc.) affected the students’ understanding of the writing assignment. While thirteen of twenty-two responses that mention order felt it was important, most responses indicated that order would not be problematic as long as the pertinent information is present and there is not a specific order in which the resulting paper should be structured. Responses that claimed order to be important usually discussed assignments that required some sort of logical order, like the steps to a laboratory experiment.
Freedom to Choose Their Own Writing Topics

Ten responses argued for students’ freedom to choose their writing topics. Some claimed the best writing assignments allowed students the freedom to construct their own topics; others argued the worst assignments restricted students by forcing a particular topic or subject that may not be interesting to the student, may be too personal for the student to discuss, or may have been assigned numerous times in the past and has become monotonous.

Writing Assignment Sheet Clarification Issues

One of the most addressed issue for students was the need to clarify writing assignment sheets, be it on the word, sentence, or conceptual level. Eighteen responses mentioned experiences with unclear writing assignments or the need to ensure clarity of the assignment task. Students may have difficulty interpreting the writing assignment or understanding the instructor’s intended assignment, so they wish for the writing assignment sheet to clearly state the task.

Two responses reflect the effect of unclear sentences in writing assignment sheets; one states, “even though a sentence is written in correct grammar it still could be hard to follow.” Ten responses mention experiences with unclear words in writing assignment sheets, and another eighteen request that instructors lower the assignment sheet vocabulary level to clarify the intended task. So students need instructors to construct their writing assignments at a vocabulary and grammar level the students can understand.
Conciseness

Six responses suggest that instructors create shorter writing assignment sheets. Students prefer short and concise writing assignment sheets that do not overwhelm them. Another sever responses address this issue more specifically, requesting that instructors use shorter sentences and possibly bulleted lists of instructions for writing assignment sheets.

Student Concerns as Related to Current Literature

Because not all of the data I collected directly contributed to the development of more effective writing assignment sheets, I focused more on the issues that relate to students’ cognitive development. This issue, however, implicates others, such as students’ misinterpretations of writing assignment sheets due to a lack of clarity or detail; therefore understanding the origin of such interpretations can contribute to students’ and instructors’ common understanding of writing assignments. I also examine authorship because of its importance in students’ engaging of a writing assignment, as well as because of its relationship to the level of detail in a writing assignment sheet. And the students’ understanding of the role of the writing assignment sheet indicates the level at which he or she examines the writing assignment task, and therefore it leads instructors to understanding the need to teach students to view writing assignments as learning opportunities rather than evaluations.
Give Clear and Concise Assignment Sheets

Use Understandable Wording

One of the larger concerns with writing assignment sheets that students expressed was the need for instructors to be concise with their assignment sheets. They felt assignment sheets contained too much unnecessary information and were not direct enough; many of them actually used the term “wordy” to describe the writing assignment sheets they had seen in the past. Students would like writing assignment sheets to be direct. I agree that assignment sheets should be direct in their expression, and though I thought my current writing assignment sheets were already concise, some students commented that objectives and components of the writing assignment could be expressed in bulleted lists, thus making the assignment sheet more direct.

Though George Brossell and Barbara Hoetker Ash, as well as Alice Brand, would agree with the development of concise writing assignment sheets, they also argue that individual words in a writing assignment sheet do not heavily impact the understanding of the writing assignment. However, their studies did not specify whether or not they introduced different levels of vocabulary to determine the effect on students’ understanding of their writing tasks. Brossel and Hoetker Ash only experimented with the order of phrasing of the question, not the level of vocabulary; and Brand simply claims that an essay prompt requires “substantial change” to affect the students’ resulting papers (14). A number of students addressed the need to clarify or define certain words in the assignment sheets they discussed.
Students argued the use of particular words that were not currently a part of their vocabulary made understanding the goal of the writing task difficult.

It should be noted, however, that students only listed words as problematic when they required amplification, not clarification. The words listed were audience, purpose, context (twice), aesthetics, conditional, subjunctive, synthesis, and thesis. Most of these words should be understood by the students because they encompass the essence of the writing assignment, so the problem does not necessarily occur within the writing assignment sheet but in the students' understanding of these concepts before they even receive the assignment sheet. I also received two responses about the Abstract assignment I gave my students:

It was the abstract assignment. I found it difficult because I had never written an abstract before, & I had trouble understanding what an abstract is.

This semester in English 105, the summary/abstract assignment. I did not understand what was allowed in the abstract, and what was not. The assignment sheet was not all that clear to me. The example of the class and not a literary work made it even more difficult to understand.

A distinction should be made, then, between terms that express concepts the students must understand to be able to accomplish the writing task and cursory terms that are simply above the vocabulary level of the students. Despite the lack of problematic examples, I would argue that we construct our assignment sheets at a vocabulary level familiar to our students to ensure understanding of the writing assignment. Ultimately this will diminish students' frustration with interpreting writing assignments.
Role of Writing Assignment Sheets

Another problem exists when writing assignment sheets are “wordy”: lengthy writing assignment sheets that students feel are not helpful in understanding and interpreting the writing assignment become discarded, as expressed by one student, “The English 105 sheets are really long and wordy. I never read everything that they said until I was out of things to write about.” This response echoes one given by a student Nelson observed, where the student exercised a similar tactic and viewed the writing assignment sheet as supplementary material rather than a beginning to her paper that could help generate the writing assignment. If we want students to write the papers we intend, not only do we need to keep our assignment sheets concise so we keep their attention through the assignment sheet, but we need to teach them how to use writing assignment sheets. The writing assignment sheet should serve as the initial point of entry into the writing of a paper; it should include the goals of the assignment, what the student can learn from the assignment, and the beginning to an avenue of discovery for the student to generate ideas.

We need to teach students that assignment sheets are not to be used as fillers for their papers, but that the concepts provided in the assignment sheets should be the central focus of their papers. If they read, understand, and incorporate the concepts in the writing assignment sheet into their papers, they will achieve our intended goals of the writing task, such as demonstrating their intellectual development and understanding of the concepts of the writing task, and therefore receive better grades.
Allow the Students to Choose Their Topics

A number of students, when defining the characteristics of what they felt a good writing assignment was, claimed "having no guidelines is what made the assignment so easy (except length & proper spelling & grammar) because there were endless possibilities" or "I got to choose my own topic and the only guidelines I had to follow were the guidelines for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc." The students acknowledge the need to conform to standard rules of English, but they obviously want authorship over their own writing, and allowing them this authorship increases their personal investment in writing, which in turn would hopefully lead them to generate better papers.

As in the case of my own English courses, some writing classes may require certain genres of writing to be practiced and learned, but that does not necessarily dictate the subject material of the papers to be written. The students in my classes must demonstrate analytical and argumentative skills, but they can do this within a wide range of topics. In all of the classes I have taught, I have allowed students to choose their own topics for analysis and argument. This topic freedom has proven to be worthwhile for me and for the students. When a student tells me he wants to argue against the death penalty in his Final Argument paper, I ask him if he has any personal interest in this issue. When I redirect his paper to his interest in dissolving the animosity between members of the ISU Greek system and non-members, his enthusiasm and interest in the topic help produce a quality paper I would not have received if written about the death penalty.
I do recognize that assigning topic material is sometimes necessary. I recently assigned an Argument Summary in which the students were simply to summarize the main points of an argument. The Iowa State English Department requires summary to be taught in English 105, as well as analysis and argument. From this assignment, I learned the value of assigning the topic material, for I received over fifty papers that summarized at least forty different arguments, all of which I would have had to read to assess the students’ writings properly. In this case, assigning the topic material is necessary so we do not overload ourselves while allowing our students to explore their interests. When I teach summary writing again, I will restrict the topic material to something we’ve read for my class. Even offering the option of several different articles would give the students more possibility of authorship in their writing.

**Teach Students Why They Are Writing: Focus on the Learning Rather Than the Task**

*Importance of Purpose in Writing*

Aside from the objectives of the assignment (the writing assignment goals related to the concepts the student should employ or the skills they should exercise in writing the paper), students also mentioned the importance of the purpose of the assignment (why they were writing a particular paper or what they were supposed to learn from the assignment). One student relates a high-school experience with his worst writing assignment experience:

I was writing a paper about the process I used to write another paper but I had no clue why I was writing it. It was a bad experience because I thought it was just the
teacher’s excuse to get us all doing something and it didn’t help me at all. A couple years later I realized that writing can be improved if you are doing all of the work.

To this student, an important aspect was missing from this assignment to justify the effort he was expected to expend in this paper. Students want to know why they are writing papers, what they can learn, and how a particular writing assignment will benefit them; and we should provide this information, for this should be our goal in any writing assignment, to ensure the student gains and/or exercises a particular knowledge. However, there is a lot of value in self-discovery, so we may not always wish to disclose our intentions with a writing assignment to force students to explore and discover the meaning behind the assignment on their own. Of course, this self-discovery should be followed with discussion that allows them to share their discoveries with the instructor so the students realize the value of the assignment and the instructor knows the students understand this.

Not all of the students who commented on the inclusion of the purpose of writing assignments were in favor of including this in the writing assignment sheets. When describing his thought process as he read through a writing assignment sheet, one student responded, “I don’t really care what the purpose of the paper is, because you have to write it no matter what.” Another student, when describing how she would construct a writing assignment sheet, commented in her response on such an attitude:

I’d also leave out an explanation of the purpose of the assignment, as most students could care less about why they’re doing a paper or what they should be learning (sad, but true). Most students just want to get the paper done & over with.

Such beliefs about writing assignments justify the need to teach writing not as a test of knowledge but as a part of the development of knowledge. We need to stress the importance
of the learning in writing and development of critical thinking the students can attain and de-emphasize the focus on the task of writing. I am not arguing that we need to justify ourselves and our assignments as being worthy of our students' time and effort, but we should include our rationale for giving a writing assignment so students know how this assignment will benefit them.

Eliminating Assignment Restrictions, Excessive Details, and Examples

A major concern mentioned in students' responses was the need for an assignment sheet to include a required page length and due date; students mentioned this information when describing their thought processes as they read through assignment sheets and in response to how they would construct their own assignment sheets. While the omission of this information in my prior assignment sheets may have influenced the results of this study and caused students to focus on this issue more than they would if I would have given them assignment sheets that included this information, some students would still express these concerns. As seen in Jennie Nelson's and Sharon Pianko's studies, where students used these requirements to determine the completion of their papers, including this information shifts the focus from the concepts and learning in the writing assignment to the fulfillment of such requirements. Eliminating restrictions on students' writing and emphasizing the complete development of their ideas and critical thinking will cause them to focus on writing as a part of learning rather than writing as a part of evaluation.
Some students also stated they like to see concrete assignment details. Most of these responses did not indicate the level of detail that should be included in the assignment sheet, but one student offered one example of the type of detail he felt was necessary: “[writing assignment sheets] are often not clear on how the student should organize his paper.” While this level of detail may help students interpret the writing task, it directs the writing assignment for the student, thus affecting his or her authorship over the paper, and provides students with too much information that eliminates the need for them to think critically. Enough detail should be provided to the students so they know what writing and thinking skills they should be using and developing, but not enough detail to minimize this development.

Students also felt that examples should be included in writing assignment sheets, or at least available to them if needed. Despite this concern and the usefulness of examples, I agree with Flower and Hayes that novice writers do not have a large enough sampling of writings to use as examples in writing. Because of this, these students viewed examples as the “correct” way to construct a paper rather than a “possible” way. The students who asked for examples of particular types of writing did so because they had never written nor seen a particular genre of writing. If students were provided with many examples—and actually read all of them—as possible solutions to a writing assignment, the use of examples would become effective because they would be able to employ techniques from different writings in their own papers. If we provide students with examples of writing, we must provide them with many examples to ensure they do not think any one example is the “correct” way to
approach a particular writing task. However, providing enough examples to introduce a
diverse enough array of possibilities, not to mention ensuring the students read all of these
examples to construct a large enough knowledge base, would be a difficult task. Until
instructors have the resources and students have the desire to read such a large sampling, we
should not provide such examples to students.

*Students' Focus on Grades Rather than Learning*

A good number of students commented on the need to include grading scales in writing
assignment sheets. These responses disturb me because many of the students phrased their
responses in a way that suggests they are relinquishing their authorship over their papers in
order to appease the instructor and receive a good grade:

Grade sheets should explain or reflect the grader’s rubric or expectations.

Some [instructors] don’t really explain what they want. One way to fix this would be
to include a grade sheet of exactly how it is to be graded.

It is also helpful to have a copy of the checklist that the teacher will be using to grade
the paper.

Writing assignment sheets should include expectations presented as, “these are the types of
skills students should demonstrate in this writing assignment, and these are the learning
objectives.” However, expectations to the degree of creating a checklist of secondary tasks
within the writing assignment not only dictates exactly what the students should include in
their papers, but eliminates portions of critical thinking and cognitive development by telling
them what they should be thinking and writing.
Though instructors need to determine what critical thinking processes—such as analysis or argument—are to be exercised in a particular writing assignment, the students should be in control of the direction of the paper. For example: A rhetorical analysis of an argument could span much longer than the three-to-four pages I usually receive from my students, yet it would not be reasonable for me to expect a First-Year Composition student to include analysis of every aspect of the argument. A particular argument may employ many emotional appeals and establish credibility very well, but not contain many logical persuasion techniques, so the analysis of this paper should focus more heavily on pathos and ethos; logos might be only briefly addressed as ineffective for a given audience. Therefore, when I grade an analysis paper, I look to be sure the student includes examples of all of the components of rhetorical analysis that are employed in the argument and thoroughly develops those examples. I do not require students to analyze every rhetorical aspect, but to be complete in those they do address. This way, the student controls the direction of the paper, while I ensure he or she properly exercises the skills addressed in the writing assignment sheet.

Establishing and presenting a grading rubric would dictate the style, voice, components, method of topic investigation, etc. of a student’s paper. The student would no longer own the paper; he or she would be writing to please the me rather than advance his or her own knowledge through critical thinking. We must present writing, writing assignments, and writing assignment sheets as a way to develop knowledge, not a way to prove it.
I had expected students to respond to question one by discussing what they liked or disliked about a given writing assignment. However, one student interpreted the first question according to the substantive comments he received. He responded:

One of my best writing assignments was in economics class when I had to synthesize different concepts to answer a question. The comments that I had [gotten in response to my paper from the instructor] were that the paper was very logical, organized and that every argument had strong backup.

The student defined his experience with his “best writing assignment” by the paper he produced and the substantive comments he received, rather than the grade he received. Therefore, we see that students do value substantive feedback about their papers, which ultimately leads to the development of their knowledge of writing. As difficult a task as it may be, we need to urge all students to value the knowledge they can gain from a writing assignment over the grade they will receive. With this focus on learning in mind, it should only follow that a student’s writing would improve through increased knowledge, and therefore this interpretation is very valid: an effective writing assignment should lead to the development of a students knowledge and, in turn, a good paper, which would then be deserving of a good evaluative mark. It is this relationship between writing as the pursuit of knowledge, the production of good papers, and good evaluative marks we must teach to our students.
IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

My Evolving Writing Assignment Philosophy

The concept of the writing assignment sheet itself needs to be taught to students in order to further their cognitive development. When students don’t understand a writing assignment, we should not present them with possible solutions to a writing task because that will eliminate the students’ opportunity to learn through the writing assignment; rather, we should provide them with ways to question the rationale and goals of the assignment, so they have an understanding of the purpose, which should lead to a solution to the writing task itself.

Because not all of my students’ responses would be considered pedagogically sound, we may not want to use some responses from my research to supplement our construction of writing assignments, but we can understand from these responses how students think and why they hold these beliefs. Addressing these concerns by teaching students how to read our writing assignment sheets—despite our stances on individual issues such as the level of information to include or allowing students the freedom of choosing their topics—will result in a better understanding between us and our students of how to achieve the goals of a given writing assignment. Students will no longer have to interpret each instructors’ intentions in a writing assignment if instructors teach students how to read the sheets themselves.

Different students will require different amplifications (such as possible writing topics or organizational patterns) of writing assignments, and this amplification should be
included orally for students who require such additional information. Including amplification in the writing assignment sheet itself might restrict students who do not require such assistance. So eliminating amplification from the assignment sheet but providing it to those who need additional assistance will guide them enough to allow them to complete the assignment while not restricting other students who appreciate the freedom of open-ended writing assignments.

High levels of detail in writing assignments are restrictions that limit students' investment in a writing assignment; the assignment becomes a task of the instructor's rather than a tool of cognitive development for the student. Students feel that highly structured tasks are a matter of being able to closely follow the directions of a writing assignment sheet, simply a check to see if they read the material or pay attention in class. There is no opportunity for exploration of a topic of interest nor a presentation of their argument in their own voice when instructors restrict writing tasks by dictating genre, style, expression, topic, length, etc.

This high level of detail also limits the amount of critical thinking required by the student in order to accomplish the writing task. If instructors provide students with too much information about the writing task, there is little opportunity for them to develop higher-level critical thinking. We need to develop writing assignment sheets that present students with a writing task of a particular type (summary, analysis, synthesis, argument, etc.), outlining particular skills the students need to demonstrate or develop in their papers, but omit specific details (topic, stance, style, voice, etc.) in order to force students to make
important developmental decisions about their own writings. This requires students to thoroughly investigate the topics they choose to write about and write about the issues they feel are most important to their particular topics.

Interpretation of a writing assignment depends upon so many variables that incorporating all of them would be an impossible task. The best we can do, then, is to construct writing assignment sheets as clearly as possible that incorporate concepts familiar to students so they are not intimidated or overwhelmed by unnecessary tasks such as interpreting academic jargon. By limiting our assignment sheets to concepts and genres of writing and excluding such things as formatting and submission requirements, writing structures, and grading rubrics; we will also leave the door open for students to incorporate creativity as well as critical thinking.

Creating writing assignments that allow for interpretation and creativity, challenging students to think critically about their papers, can require more involvement in the students’ writing processes. Because open-ended assignments allow for students to control the direction of the papers and the assignments themselves, our jobs as teachers take on another role: we must act as sounding-boards for our students so they can develop their ideas. As my assignment sheets have become less detailed, I have become more involved in my students’ writing processes. My students approach me more often now, asking me to help develop their ideas rather than information on how “I want” the paper to be developed.

Students should not have to worry about open-ended writing assignments forcing them to be creative. When I describe to them my writing assignment philosophy, my
students often comment that they aren’t “creative”—using the term to mean *artistically* creative. I assure them the assignments do not require them to be poetically or artistically original, but that the assignments are designed to allow them the freedom to choose their own paths when developing their papers and merely require that they think critically about their writing assignments. Developing such writing assignments should challenge them to think critically about their papers, but they are not required to construct “genuine works of art.”

So, this thesis study, as well as recent classroom experiences with students who have had questions about my writing assignments, has led me to consider the following criteria when designing my writing assignment sheets:

- before even giving students a writing assignment sheet, explain to them that the purpose of the assignment is not to *evaluate* their writing but to *develop* their writing; this helps ensure that they view the writing assignment sheet not as a contract binding instructors and themselves to specific grading or writing requirements
- challenge students with writing assignments—make them think critically so they not only learn for themselves the process of writing but also gain better understandings of their writing topics
- allow students to choose the topics for their writings so they feel like they have authorship over their papers
- offer different levels of detail for students and present these levels of detail as options, not requirements; this will allow advanced students the freedom to explore their own interests in an issue or writing style while providing enough detail to give
other students possible starting points in their writings—offer these starting points as questions, not answers (see Appendix G)

- make the assignment sheets flexible—my latest writing assignment sheets are not handed out but exist on our class website; if my students have questions about particular assignment sheet that may need clarification, I can easily add to that sheet so all of my students have easy access to the changes

Ongoing Development of My Writing Assignment Sheets

Despite my research, I still do not believe I have reached a point in my own writing assignment development process where I would be satisfied with my writing assignment sheets. My Final Argument writing assignment sheet, as well as the writing assignment sheets I’ve further revised since this study, still address and incorporate too many concrete details of my intended writing assignments, and, I feel, guide the students too much.

My latest version of writing assignments (Appendix G) combines different assignment sheets together from our class website to allow students to generate their own writing assignments and the papers that respond to those assignments. I provide for them the general concepts involved with creating an analysis or argument paper, as well as how and why to incorporate research, as well as weekly journal assignments on loosely defined topics that allow the students to explore interesting aspects of argument or analysis issues we discuss in class. The journal assignments themselves are composed almost entirely of questions that explore different aspects of the central topic; the students are required to
choose any of these avenues of exploration and write a brief analysis, argument, response, etc. in their weekly journals (typically one- or two-page, informal writings about the issues). Students' major papers can then be developed from these journals, adhering more closely to formal academic writing, as the students incorporate the concepts of analysis or argument from the website text describing these.

Developing effective writing assignment sheets is a continuous process. Each time I distribute a writing assignment sheet, students present new questions that provide yet more insight into their interpretations of my writing assignment sheets. Instructors need to utilize these questions from students: this is the feedback that allows us to understand how our students think and to develop writing assignment sheets that will better relate to them. Each of these experiences teaches me more about my writing assignment sheets, and I am able to further develop them so students better understand the writing tasks I present. In my future classrooms, I hope to more clearly and completely teach my students my writing assignment sheet philosophy as well as learn more from them, so I can create assignment sheets that better encompass my philosophy and my students can learn more from my classes and writing assignments.
Appendix A. Abstract Assignment Sheet

Abstract
Write an abstract of “The Speech the Graduates Didn't Hear” from Jacob Neusner.

A summary is an unbiased account of the events and/or main points of an article, book, movie, etc. in which you relate the author’s ideas in your own words. An abstract is a summary with a very specific purpose: it focuses less on the chronological presentation of events or ideas and focuses more on the theme or argument of the article, book, movie, etc. An abstract is generally very short, about 100-150 words.

Normally an author would write an abstract about his or her own writing because the author knows what the intended theme or argument of the article is, whereas we will have to interpret the article. Normally your opinion is not included in a summary or abstract—just a relation of the author's argument—and judgmental terms are avoided. Since we are not Neusner, imagine yourself as the author of this speech: what would be your intended argument and purpose of giving this graduation speech. Do not worry about your interpretation; just be sure to focus on that interpretation and write an abstract that focuses on that interpretation.

The purpose of this assignment is threefold:

1. to show you can detect the main points in an argument; this is analysis and will help you understand how arguments are written so you can improve your own arguments
2. to make you think critically and closely examine the style and method of argument of Neusner, then present that argument in an unbiased manner
3. for our final major paper, the argument paper, you will be asked to write an abstract of your own argument, so this provides practice

Be sure your abstract is brief but fully encompasses (your interpretation of) the argument. That is the difficulty of writing abstracts; but those abstracts that do both are subject to much better grades. Here is an example of a summary and abstract [with a hyper-link to the example below].

This paper is due Friday, February 4th.
Example Summary / Abstract of English 105

- Summary [hyper-link to respective heading below]
- Abstract [hyper-link to respective heading below]

**Summary** (200+ words, and it's not even complete)

English 105 will begin with an introduction of the course and its main goals, along with an introductory paper that provides the instructor with a sample of students' writing as well as insight into individual personalities.

In the first couple weeks, we will be covering some basic and more concrete information such as documentation of sources, summaries, and abstracts. Not much time will be spent on this since the course focuses mainly on critical thinking, analysis, and argument.

Once this information is covered, we will begin exploring argument and set a foundation for our future studies and analyses by reading Plato's Meno. Discussion of Plato and his argumentative style and tactics will lead into our first exploration of Rhetorical Analysis.

Our first segment of rhetorical analysis will be the Rhetorical Situation: audience, purpose, and context. The class will examine how the rhetorical situation is the foundation from which argument and analysis are based by examining how audience, purpose, and context affect the way an author must structure an argument. Once we begin the rhetorical situation segment, we will explore how various comedians, such as Carlin, Letterman, and Seinfeld, employ their understanding of the rhetorical situation to their comedy.

After the rhetorical situation segment, yada, yada, yada... (explaining the entire semester chronologically, with very basic examples).

**Abstract** (60 words)

Through examination of Plato's classical rhetoric and his style, applying his strategies and techniques to examine the styles of present-day comedians such as Carlin, Letterman, and Seinfeld, and relating the materials of English 105 directly to the students in the class, we will explore and understand the concept and process of critical thinking as it applies in analysis and argument.
APPENDIX B. ADVERTISING ANALYSIS ASSIGNMENT SHEET

English 105

Advertising Analysis

Assignment
Choose any advertisement (from TV, a book, a magazine, etc.) and analyze the rhetorical situation of that ad.

Details
Be sure to state what ad you chose to analyze, and if possible, turn in a copy of the ad with your other materials.

Any good advertisement takes into account the rhetorical situation. Once you choose an ad, I want you to fully explain the rhetorical situation surrounding that ad. You need to fully describe the audience, purpose, and context of the ad and tell me how these components dictate the development and techniques of your ad. How does the rhetorical situation influence or impact the ad?

When analyzing your advertisement, show me how particular components from the ad are affected by audience, purpose, or context. Don’t just say, “It's a billboard”; fully explain how the fact that the ad is a billboard affects the way the message is presented (tell about its size, how people see it, how much time the audience actually has to view it, etc.) Show how the audience, purpose and context affect each other; for example, we have seen that when you alter the context of a situation, the particular audience can also be affected (when Seinfeld argues about not being able to adjust the thermostat in the car, he isn’t talking about the new cars with front- and back-seat thermostats, so the situation changes, and then so does his audience), so be sure to show how the components intertwine and are affected by one another.

This is a rhetorical analysis, so remember you do not summarize or evaluate the advertisement. I know what the ad is and I don't care whether you think it's good or bad; all I want is for you to tell me how the advertisement responds to its rhetorical situation.

Purposes
The overall goal of this assignment is to understand the rhetorical situation. Understanding the effects of audience, purpose, and context will help you develop your own arguments later in the class. Specifically, the goals include:

- to develop our understanding of the rhetorical situation and its influence on arguments
- to learn how addressing audience, purpose, and context can shapes the way an argument presents its message (your advertisement is essentially an argument)
- to understand how advertisements influence their audiences; this is not something you need to address in your paper, but it is something I hope we will all gain from studying this material and analyzing audience, purpose, and context

Evaluation
Your Advertising Analysis will be evaluated on how well it accomplishes the following:

- identifies the audience, purpose, and context of the advertisement and completely explains how the ad is affected by these
- provides fully complete critical analysis of the rhetorical situation of the ad, not a summary or evaluation of the ad
- uses spelling, grammar, and punctuation which comply with standard rules of English
APPENDIX C. PERSUASION ANALYSIS ASSIGNMENT SHEET

English 105

Persuasion Analysis

Assignment
Choose a topic for your final paper in this class (the Argumentative Research Paper) and analyze the rhetorical situation surrounding your particular topic.

Details
Just like with your Advertising Analysis paper, you will be analyzing the rhetorical situation, but of your chosen topic for your final Argumentative Research Paper.

Any good argument takes into account the rhetorical situation. Once you choose your topic, I want you to fully explain the rhetorical situation surrounding that topic. You need to fully describe the audience, purpose, and context of the topic and tell me how these components will dictate the development and techniques of your argument. How will the rhetorical situation influence or impact your final paper? For more details about the rhetorical situation, see your Advertising Analysis assignment sheet.

Obviously, when addressing different audiences, trying to achieve different purposes, within different contexts, you will have to adjust the types of evidence and support you will use for your argument. You need to determine whether your audience will respond better to facts, statistics, examples, analogies, emotional appeals, testimonials, endorsements, direct approaches, subtle tactics, etc. Most likely, you will need a combination of many of these to address different secondary audiences, as well as provide support for your support. After you examine the rhetorical situation, examine what types of support you will use to argue your position on your topic and why this type of support will be necessary.

Again, this is a rhetorical analysis, so remember you do not summarize or evaluate the topic. I want you to tell me how your Argumentative Research Paper will need to respond to its rhetorical situation.

The overall goal of this assignment is to understand the rhetorical situation of the topic on which you want to write your Argumentative Research Paper. Understanding the effects of audience, purpose, and context will help you develop your own arguments on your final paper. Specifically, the goals include:

• to learn how to address your audience, purpose, and context in your upcoming Argumentative Research Paper and how you will need to address the rhetorical situation
• to examine what types of support for your arguments you will need to include to persuade your audience in your final paper
• to gain a more complete understanding of your topic: for your understanding of the topic, so you can write a better paper on this assignment, as well as on your final project

Evaluation
Your Persuasion Analysis will be evaluated on how well it accomplishes the following:

• identifies the audience, purpose, and context of the topic and completely explains how the subject is affected by these
• identifies techniques, approaches, and types of support necessary to achieve your given purpose with your audience, considering the context of your topic
• provides fully complete critical analysis of the rhetorical situation of the topic, not a summary or evaluation of the topic
• uses spelling, grammar, and punctuation which comply with standard rules of English
APPENDIX D. DATA COLLECTION WORKSHEET

Writing Assignment Sheets

For my thesis, I am gathering feedback from English 105 students to see what kinds of things you look for in writing assignment sheets. The purpose of this thesis study is to collect your concerns so that I can create assignment sheets that you will find easier to understand.

What I want you to do for this journal assignment is write about what kinds of things you think are important things to include in writing assignment sheets (the actual sheet that has the details of what you're supposed to do for a paper). This journal assignment will allow us to be able to look at writing assignment sheets and better understand what tasks we are supposed to do when we get a writing assignment.

I would like to be able to use your responses to these questions as research for my thesis. Anything that I use in my thesis will be used with complete confidentiality:

- I will be using your responses to establish categories of general concerns
- my research will be looking more at similarities between answers, not individual comments, so your answers are more likely to be grouped than actually quoted
- if I do happen to quote something directly from your responses, I will use a pseudonym to ensure anonymity

If you do not wish for me to be able to use your responses for my thesis, that is not a problem. There is no penalty to your grade for not wanting to participate in my research project, nor will people participating in my project receive special treatment or favoritism.

Please sign on the line below and indicate whether or not I may use your answers in my thesis research.

☐ Yes, Greg Klotz may use my responses in his thesis. I understand that he will not use my name in any part of his thesis.

☐ No, Greg Klotz may not use my responses in his thesis. I understand I must still complete this worksheet for my journal assignment.

Signature

__________________________________________
Assignment Questions

On the back of this sheet, please respond to three of the following. Choose three that you
feel are most important for instructors to consider when designing a writing assignment. In
the space provided, put the number of the question or scenario you are responding to; then,
check the appropriate boxes that relate to your answer. For example, if you are writing about
a writing assignment you had in a high-school English class, you would check these boxes:

Response to #

- High School
- College
- Writing Class
- Non-writing Class

(and your response would follow here)

1. Think of all of the writing assignments you have had and write about either the best or the
worst writing assignment. What made this assignment good or bad? How was it easy or
difficult to understand?

2. Describe your thought process when you get a writing assignment sheet. How do you
read the sheet? What do you look for first? What do you think is most important?

3. What problems have you seen with writing assignment sheets in the past? What do you
think could have been done to fix these problems?

4. You are designing your own writing assignment sheet. How would you begin? You’ve
seen what instructors include in assignment sheets, but what kinds of things would you
include in or eliminate from your assignment sheet? Why?

5. Think of a time when you were given a writing assignment sheet but still didn’t really
understand what task you were supposed to accomplish in the assignment. Describe this
experience and tell why you had problems understanding the writing assignment sheet.

6. Do you think the order of parts of an assignment sheet is important? If so, in what order
would you include parts of the assignment and why would you pick this order? If not,
why not?

7. Have you ever had problems with an assignment sheet because of particular words on the
sheet? Why did these words cause such a problem? (list the words if you can remember
them)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to #</th>
<th>□ High School</th>
<th>□ College</th>
<th>□ Writing Class</th>
<th>□ Non-writing Class</th>
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<td>□ College</td>
<td>□ Writing Class</td>
<td>□ Non-writing Class</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E. DATA COLLECTION OF STUDENT RESPONSES

| HS | W | The best assignment I ever had was in high school. We had absolutely no guidelines except that the paper needed to be 30 pages long. We could write about anything: short story, sci-fi, you name it. If we felt there needed to be profanity etc. in the paper then we were allowed to include it in our paper. Having no guidelines is what made the assignment so easy (except length & proper spelling & grammar) because there were endless possibilities. |
| HS | NW | One of the worst assignments I was ever given was writing about certain happenings in the past: basically about your family & school problems. I really disliked this assignment because I personally feel uncomfortable talking about my past because I'm afraid that the things I write will influence how the teacher looks at em now. The way it was graded, it seemed to me, was on the basis of how much information you disclosed. |
| C | NW | For my architecture studies class we had to write a paper describing an object but we couldn't say what material it was made of. We had to also describe what it did without relating it to other objects. For example, you couldn't say (for a hammer) that it pounds a nail into wood. You would have to say with an exerted downward force it applies pressure to an object, (describe the nail), and forces it to break the fibers and imbed itself in a material, (describe the wood). Which makes the paper hard to write and really hard to read, so other people couldn't proofread it. |
| HS | W | I had an open assignment in 12th grade for my advanced composition class. I liked it because I had plenty of time to do research. I got to choose my own topic and the only guidelines I had to follow were the guidelines for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc., etc. |
| HS-C | [NW] | The worst was an assignment sheet in gov. that all it said was write a two to three page paper relating gov. to this class. It sucked, and I didn't know what to write about. |
HS  W  One of the overall worst writing class I ever had was in high school. My teacher assigned way, WAY, WAY too much stuff at one time, and we ended up not doing half of the writing assignments, since we (the class) didn't have enough time, and she forgot she assigned them. So, don't overload the class.

HS  NW  The best writing assignment that I received were the ones that were free writing with poetic license and the ones where we were to write about a personal experience and/or a person we knew. I don't like grammatical rules. I write the way I want it to be read. When I write about personal experiences, I write with a certain degree of emotion. I think that makes anything more interesting to read and to write; especially more interesting than a generic research paper.

C  Last semester I had an assignment sheet that confused me on how he was going to grade the class overall. The words didn't seem to make sense because they were repetitious. It turns out she was explaining the same thing but in different ways.

HS-C  W  The easiest and best writing assignment I've done was an essay I wrote in highschool about a personal experience. Everything came from the heart so it was easy & flowed onto the paper. The hardest assignment I ever got was at WITCC, in my English comp class. She gave out random pictures to the class. Then you had to write a 4-5 page story about the picture. My picture was a stupid monkey. What the hell can I write about a monkey?

C  W  I like assignment sheets with good order. And I think it is better to have all information in points and short explanations.

C  W  All of the rhetorical situation writings have been extremely difficult. All through my highschool years, I thought I had tough writing assignments. So I am not sure if it is good or bad. Probably good because I enjoy a good challenge. Probably the reason it is so challenging is because it was difficult for me to comprehend.

HS-C  I think the worst writing assignment I've had is the first writing assignment I get in almost every English class I have. It's the assignment that you have to write about yourself. It's not a hard assignment, but I've wrote the same assignment almost twenty times.
The best writing assignment I had in my opinion, was an in class story assignment. We had an hour to write any type of story fantasy or not. I somehow was very creative that day and wrote a two and a half page story on a one-armed man who was killing people for no reason. It was one of the first papers I wrote off the top of my head in complete fantasy, it was a very fun paper to write.

I was writing a paper about the process I used to write another paper but I had no clue why I was writing it. It was a bad experience because I thought it was just the teacher's excuse to get us doing something and it didn't help me at all. A couple years later I realized that writing can be improved if you are doing all of the work.

I believe that the things that make an assignment easy or hard is if the student wants to do the assignment. Students usually like to do things that they are interested in & not do things that they are not interested in.

One of my best writing assignments was in economics class when I had to synthesize different concepts to answer a question. The comments that I had were that the paper was very logical, organized and that every argument had strong backup.

The first time we had a paper about audience, purpose, and context. I wasn't very sure about what each of them were, so it made it hard to write the paper.

Since I have never done a rhetorical analysis, when that assignment came up, it was hard to understand exactly what was needed or expected. Assignment sheets really can't go into much detail about exactly what should be in the paper.

The rhetorical analysis that we did this semester is one of the few assignments that I have had to do that required a lot of thinking to understand. It forced me [to] expand my knowledge & break the mold of my thinking. Even though I didn't enjoy the paper, it will help me as I further my education.

We were given a 5 paragraph format. We had to follow the format so everyone's paper had the same number of sentences. Each paragraph had a topic sentence, 3 examples, 3 explanations and a transition sentence.
Describe your thought process when you get a writing assignment sheet. How do you read the sheet? What do you look for first? What do you think is most important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>When I receive a sheet, I first look over the required topic. Then I brainstorm for ideas, while making sure they all work with the assignment sheet. Finally, I check for a required time/length limit.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>When I get an assignment sheet I simply read straight through it. The first thing I look for is what we are supposed to do. I think the most important part is knowing what the instructor will be grading for. That way you know exactly what needs to be included in your paper. I don't really care what the purpose of the paper is, because you have to write it no matter what. If you know what the instructor is looking for, then it is much easier to write the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>When I first get a writing assignment sheet I look for the due date and how long the paper should be, so I know how many hours I have to spend on it. As I read through it I try to figure out how well I know the subject, so I can figure out if I have to research. The most important part of the assignment sheet is how simple the explanation is. It is better to make it sound elementary than have the students guess at what you want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I first look at the subject of the paper and I make sure that I understand what the paper should be about. I then look at the length the paper should be and also at when it is due. I read through to get the main point of the assignment and then look at ways of support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>I skim the sheet &amp; then put away until the day before it is due &amp; bring out to write.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>When I first get an assignment sheet, the things I look for are: when it is due, length requirements, if a R.D. [rough draft] is due. Then I put it in my folder &amp; procrastinate until it is due.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>My thought process when given an assignment sheet: &quot;Oh, bother, another assignment! I wonder what we have to do now. Hmmm... what's this thing say?&quot; Then I scan it really quick and hope someone else asks a question about something because it's not likely I'll read the entire thing until closer to the due date. I think it is very important for assignment sheets to be short, sweet, and concise and not have long sentences that go on for a page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C W-NW</td>
<td>When I get an assignment sheet I look for the objectives, length of assignment &amp; due date.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I look at the length first, then I look to see if I have to research, then I look the see how much info I need. I don't think any part is more important than another.

When I look at an assignment sheet the first thing I look at is the requirements and what should be included in the paper. Then I go through and read the rest of the assignment sheet. I think the most important thing on an assignment sheet is the guidelines and what should be included in the paper.

I always tend to look at the grading scale info first. Then I go to the major assignments & the test dates.

When I read an assignment sheet I always start by reading the criteria. Then I will go to the top and read through the purpose and examples of what can be written about. While I'm reading I always think about what I'm going to write about and how. I think the most important part to an assignment sheet is to have an example. That will usually answer the questions a confused student would have.

I read the main idea on what the assignment is. Then I think about that & try & come up with a few ideas.

When I look at an assignment sheet the first thing I go to is how long the paper has to be. I then look at how many sources I have to have and when it is due. I think the due date and length is most important because it's hard to get the assignment done when you are a procrastinator like me and I have trouble writing a lot of pages.

When I read an assignment sheet, I first look for what it has to be about, then the guidelines and form of the paper.

When I look at an assignment sheet the first thing I look at is the due date so I know how long I can put off actually writing the paper. Next I read the assignment sheet to understand the assignment and so I can pick a topic to write about.

I am thinking that I don't want a paper. Then I start thinking about what my topic will be at the same time the teacher is going over it. I look at the due date first, then I look at what should be incorporated in it.

When I get an assignment sheet, I try to find the purpose of the paper I am going to be writing. I also always look at if given what the instructor will be looking for and what he is emphasizing with the specific paper.
Fall semester, in English 104, I had to write an assignment over a controversial topic (i.e. abortion, affirmative action, etc.). To write any argument, I have to be fired up--motivated--to sell my argument. At the time, I was not motivated. The assignment was extremely difficult.

The first thing I think about when I get an assignment sheet is the things I will have to accomplish in order to write a good paper. When I get the sheet I read the assignment, then the evaluation. The rest of the sheet is not really necessary. The details and purposes sections just say what the assignment is in too many words.

I look for how the assignment will be graded or what the teacher is looking for in a paper. I look for explanations and points that paper should cover in concise bullets or sentences.

In all of my assignments and on all of the assignment sheets I'll read the whole thing first, then I think of ideas. After I read the whole thing I look at length and type of paper to help decide what I want my topic to be.

When I get an assignment sheet the first things I look at are the due date and the grading criteria. I also find a brief description of the paper helpful so that I know what I should be writing. Most assignment sheets do contain these things, but most usually leave out writing examples. I wish this wasn't the case, because these really help me in understanding just what the prof. is looking for. (Although I understand why these examples are generally not given, because teachers don't want students to copy the sample writing.) The most important things on the sheet are: the paper description & grading criteria, in my opinion. (I also look for a length requirement on assignment sheets!)

At first I just read the whole assignment to get a general understanding. Then I look for what the tasks are and underline big words. From there I look for a thesis and some main points that I put in logical order.

When I first get one I look at due date first. Think about how I am going to do it and get it done on time. Then at what is wanted (the criteria) for the paper. That is pretty much it.

The first thing I look for is deadlines for the paper or parts of the paper. I look for what is needed to be done, in a chronological order. Most important, though, is the aspect of the paper that is most relevant to the grade, which should be explained thoroughly.
The first thing I want to see is some sort of general summary of what the assignment is all about. Then I want an explanation of the specific components the teacher is looking for.

I like when you tell exactly what you are looking for and what you are grading. This makes it easier to write the paper because I know what to put in it.

When I get a writing assignment sheet, I normally look at the subject of the paper, and how long it has to be. I think the most important part of the sheet is giving the purpose behind the assignment. Also, criteria for grading helps a lot.

When I get an assignment sheet, I first look for the major objective of the assignment. The goal is most important because it guides the rest of the work that will be needed to complete the assignment. Then I look for what needs to be done to accomplish the goal.

I look over the whole writing assignment sheet when I first get it. Then I tend to focus on the part that talks about what the main requirements are and how to do the particular assignment. The requirements, I feel, are the most important part of the assignment sheet.

When I get a writing sheet, first I read through it top to bottom. I then look back through it to try to decipher the main points. I then read through it again and try to understand how I am supposed to set up my paper. I think the most important part of an assignment sheet is where it describes the outline of the paper.

I read the assignment sheet from top to bottom. The most important parts are: how many pages, what the teacher is looking for, specifics of the paper, and requirements. It is also helpful to have a copy of the checklist that the teacher will be using to grade the paper.

The first thing that I do when receiving an assignment sheet is skim it & get the basic idea & feel of my interpretation. Then I take a closer look at it & see if my initial thought is right. After the preliminary thoughts, I ask questions & think of topics.

1) what does the teacher want—most important; first thing to look for; 2) what do I know about the topic; 3) are there any new stipulations

First I look for due dates and length of paper so I can begin to plan a time to do the assignment and know how much time I need to plan. Most important however is a detailed description of the assignment itself. Maybe even a small sample.
**What problems have you seen with writing assignment sheets in the past? What do you think could have been done to fix these problems?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C</th>
<th>The professors often know in their heads what they want, but are very unclear when they put it on paper.</th>
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<tr>
<td>HS-C W-NW</td>
<td>Never receiving a writing assignment sheet. Having the prof/instructor give the assignment once orally didn't really connect. There were always questions &amp; portions of the paper were left out. This could have been ameliorated by the prof/instructor taking the time &amp; creating an assignment sheet. It also helps to prove that something wasn't in the assignment that the prof/instructor graded on.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS W</td>
<td>The problem with the assignment sheets in this class was that they were extremely vague--which is good, I guess, if you want variety but he graded on a very specific scale of certain aspects he wanted--without telling the class what exactly he was looking for in our papers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>A problem with writing assignment sheets is that it seems that sometimes professors try to write an explanation of the paper that is very detailed and uses large words so that the paper seems very difficult. To fix this, I would keep it very basic and use simple words so the student understands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>In English 104 the assignment sheets were very vague and unorganized. This made the assignment unclear because we didn't know what was expected in the papers. This could have been improved by adding more specific details and more clear directions about what was expected in the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C W-NW</td>
<td>In high school a few of my writing classes used assignment sheets that had no examples. I was always worried that I wasn't writing what was asked for. I really suggest the use of examples. Then a class here (bio lab) we had to write a research paper that had an in depth criteria. I followed every part of it and got a bad grade. I also suggest to use the criteria presented for the paper.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>There are too many typos.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>Sometimes, the sentences are too long &amp; it is hard to understand, and sometimes we might don't get all the points very well. Simplified the sentences and make it systematically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C W</td>
<td>Problems earlier in the semester included a lack of due dates on the actual assignment sheet. It was fixed by the instructor telling us the due dates and the next assignment sheet did have the due dates.</td>
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<td>HS</td>
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<td>HS</td>
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The problem I've had with assignment sheets in the past is that they didn't give enough info to have a sure idea of what you are supposed to do on the assignment. I think the instructor should read through the assignment sheet as if he were a student rather than the instructor and see if he or she would completely comprehend the assignment from that perspective.

The problem I have with most assignment sheets is that they are often very vague. That is, they do not tell the student enough information. They leave the students confused and irritated. Also, they are often not clear on how the student should organize his paper.

The assignment sheets can be to wordy sometimes. They just need to be put in a simple language that doesn't take a dictionary to understand. They don't need to be elaborate, just simple and to the point.

I hate when teachers leave the assignment really open. I know the point is to make it so everyone's paper is different & so that it pertains to a subject they like but you can do that & still give a form or base to work from.
You are designing your own writing assignment sheet. How would you begin? You’ve seen what instructors include in assignment sheets, but what kinds of things would you include in or eliminate from your assignment sheet? Why?

C  W-NW I would use bullets in an outline form to clearly define exactly what needs to be included in the assignment; this would be at the top of the page. In bold print I would include the most important aspects—due date. At the bottom of the page I would define anything that may be of concern. I would keep it short, simple, and to the point. It needs to be easy to read and not lengthy. The longer it is, the less likely I am to really read it. I will also remember important aspects if they are clearly defined and bold. I might include subheadings. I wouldn't include examples but I would make them accessible.

I would include examples, if necessary, of what was being assigned. You have good assignment sheets.

I would start it with definitions of all the new words used in the assignment sheet. This way students would have a better understanding of what they were supposed to do.

HS-C  W-NW I would begin with what they are supposed to write about. Give the due-date, and guidelines, then I would give an example of topics or an example paper.

C  

I would try to make it look good, then I would try to make it go in a good logical order. I wouldn't change much.

C  

My assignment sheet would begin with the assignment. It would be followed with the evaluation and then would be complete. I may have an example section in between the assignment and the evaluation if the assignment gave me the opportunity to provide examples. I would keep my assignment sheet short and to the point because I believe other parts on the sheet do not help students with the assignment.

I would start out with a description of the final product and relate it to something that they have probably written in the past. Then I would give whatever specific criteria is necessary followed by an evaluation split up into categories so they know exactly the same scale I will use to grade it. This will avoid grading walls that students never get above. Finally, there would be a timeline of important dates for longer assignments.
In designing an assignment sheet, I'd start off with the vital statistics--the due date, length requirement & a brief description of the paper. I'd follow this up with a sample writing, so students would know how to go about writing the paper. Then, I'd write the grading criteria last. (Making sure not to do a rubric format, because students then only do the minimum work required for a particular grade.) I'd also leave out an explanation of the purpose of the assignment, as most students could care less about why they're doing a paper or what they should be learning (sad, but true). Most students just want to get the paper done & over with.

The assignment would be first along with when it is due. Next would be a details section describing things wanted in the assignment. Finally I would conclude with exactly how it was going to be graded.

If I were to design my own assignment sheet I would first include the specifically defined assignment/objectives. Then state the specific details to be completed by the student. Purposes of the assignment should come next & finally, how the paper will be evaluated & when the paper will be due. Many professors don't include contact information or help room info. I would definitely add these.

I would leave your assignment sheets the way they are. They give examples of what to do and how you grade, plus they tell you what you should be learning.

You definitely want the due dates & length & all that stuff for sure. Then put how you want it written & the details of what to include. Next, the way the paper will be graded--what's most important to include.
Think of a time when you were given a writing assignment sheet but still didn't really understand what task you were supposed to accomplish in the assignment. Describe this experience and tell why you had problems understanding the writing assignment sheet.

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<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>We received the assignment sheet, but it wanted us to write about things that we hadn't even gone over yet, plus the instructions were very &quot;wordy.&quot; That is what made it so unclear. One thing that has always helped me is if I am given an example. In my English 104 class, the instructor would give us the assignment sheet, plus an example paper that we could use to help us along with our papers. This helped very much. If the assignment sheet is unclear, you can look at the example paper to help clear things up &amp; make your paper better.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>I didn't understand exactly what the assignment was and subsequently wrote about the wrong topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>I didn't understand how to write an analysis paper without using arguments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>It was the abstract assignment. I found it difficult because I had never written an abstract before, &amp; I had trouble understanding what an abstract is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td></td>
<td>I was really confused and I didn't do good on the paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Once in high school I was told to write a literary analysis of a story we had just read. My teacher passed out an assignment sheet &amp; told us to get to work, but the sheet didn't explain the paper at all, the only things given were the due date, the length requirement, &amp; our topic. Our teacher just assumed we had all written literary analysis before &amp; know what they were. (No one had.) Thankfully, we managed to persuade her to explain more about the paper, otherwise the whole class (having no idea what was expected) would probably have gotten terrible grades on this paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>[W]</td>
<td>I was a little bit confused with the advertisement paper because I wasn't really sure about what to say about context and I didn't actually understand that I was supposed to relate it to the audience and purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>NW</td>
<td>We were supposed to give a group presentation in an intro. to music education class, and the prof. explanation was extremely vague. When it came to her grading our presentations it turned out she had her own ideas of exactly what she wanted from us in order to do well on the project. It's important that the specifics of the assignment are made clear in order to avoid misunderstandings.</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>A problem I had once in an assignment sheet was that I couldn't understand how to set up my paper. The sheet used too many vague words, so I couldn't tell what I was supposed to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I didn't understand what was to be done, I knew a paper and how many pages was what I needed to do, but not what I was supposed to write on the paper.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS NW</td>
<td>In Government class in Highschool we were given a choice of different topics to write about. Lengths and specific topics to write about weren't given. The topics were broad and confusing as far as figuring out what the point of the assignment was.</td>
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Do you think the order of parts of an assignment sheet is important? If so, in what order would you include parts of the assignment and why would you pick this order? If not, why not?

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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I think the order is important. First, all preliminary data such as length, type of paper, context, etc., should come first. Second, a list of all of the paper's requirements should be listed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>I think the order is important because the assignment sheet needs to be organized so that it is able to be understood. I would begin by giving a basic overview of the entire paper; the subject, length, due date...and then start going into more detail once the student has the general idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W-NW I don't think the order of parts on an assignment sheet does matter, as long as all of the parts are present with, of course, the information necessary to properly understand them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>No the order is not important. I usually end up picking pieces out of the assignment sheet anyway and make my own logical order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>W-NW I think that the order of parts on a writing assignment is important. People like myself attempt to use that order when doing the assignment. The parts should be placed in the order that the teacher would like to see them, that is, if it is that type of assignment. The parts that are just general should be placed under a separate section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>W-NW The order of an assignment sheet is important. Many people take it as it is an assignment which they will do the required &amp; turn it in. Major components: due date, length, objectives, grading criteria, requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>No because not all people follow the same pattern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W I think the order is important. I think the thing most people look at first is the guidelines and requirements so I think that should be first on the assignment sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>NW I think it's important because I prefer to have the major assignments first. It's easier for me to go back &amp; look at the sheet &amp; find it in the beginning than having to scan the whole sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W I don't think order is all that important just as long as the assignment is laid out so everybody know the what, when, and why's. If the essentials are there, there shouldn't be a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>I don't think the order of parts on the assignment sheet is important as long as the assignment makes sense and is clearly explained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Put the due date on top, then go into what the paper is about, then go into what you expect to be in the paper. This is how I look over it, so if it was top to bottom, it would be easier to read.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>I feel it is important to put an assignment sheet in a logical order. I believe many people just look at what the paper is going to be evaluated on and don't pay enough attention to details and the overall goal of a paper. With this in mind it is a good idea to put the evaluation of grading at the end of an assignment sheet, so that they read through the other parts first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>This semester in English 105, the summary/abstract assignment. I did not understand what was allowed in the abstract, and what was not. The assignment sheet was not all that clear to me. The example of the class and not a literary work made it even more difficult to understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>I do not believe the order of parts is important on an assignment sheet. I usually scan the sheet quickly and just pay more attention to the evaluation part. As long as the part[s] are separated into groups which order they are in does not affect the goal of the sheet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>The order that is given on the assignment sheet is usually the order that is used when writing papers. The order that the teacher uses is the way that students write the paper.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I believe that order doesn't matter, because the way I look at it is I read the whole sheet, so it makes no difference in what order the info appears in.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I do and I don't. I don't think that there should be a specific order that one has to follow. Some may just like to sit down and write the paper instead of thinking it through and then just correct it as they go. I think that there should be some ideas and an outline offered though. It depends on the student and how he writes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>[The assignment would be first along with when it is due. Next would be a details section describing things wanted in the assignment. Finally I would conclude with exactly how it was going to be graded.] Including a copy of what you grade on helps too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Order is not important on an assignment sheet. As long as the important info is listed, the student should be able to pick it apart anyway. Content is more important than order.</td>
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<td>HS-C</td>
<td>W-NW</td>
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Have you ever had problems with an assignment sheet because of particular words on the sheet? Why did these words cause such a problem? (list the words if you can remember them)

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<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>The particular words on the assignment sheet were rather vague I thought. I also did not fully understand audience, purpose, &amp; context. Personally, I enjoy reading an assignment sheet that I can understand than one that I can't. The assignment sheet would have made more sense if one didn't have to use a dictionary to understand it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>I have had more problems with the way sentences were written rather than the actual words themselves. Even though a sentence is written in correct grammar it still could be hard to follow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>NW</td>
<td>The instructor used words that were unfamiliar to me so it was difficult to fully understand the assignment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>I didn't clearly understand what was meant by the word context.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding assignment sheets is sometimes difficult. It is hard to understand when the teacher using large words that you have to look up the meaning of to understand the sentence. This makes it difficult to understand a simple assignment. words: context, synthesis, thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>I remember having problems in my advanced composition class in highschool. On every assignment sheet the teacher would use the most extravagant words she could think up. The problem was a lot of the kids in the class didn't know what the words meant. By the time I figured out what the words meant I won't know what to do with the assignment. The only reason I could finish the paper was because she gave an example with every assignment sheet. That always really helped.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Yes, sometimes certain words can have different meanings and cause different interpretation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>NW</td>
<td>Some of the words they use to explain things I have never seen before and do not know what they mean. I would use smaller words or explain the big words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS-C</td>
<td>W-NW</td>
<td>There have been many times in highschool and college, in writing classes and non-writing classes where the assignment sheets are unclear because of the technical wording, making it hard to understand, or not coming out and telling what the actual assignment is in a straight forward way.</td>
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In English 104 I had an English teacher that was extremely smart. He would use words that students couldn't understand. This made it difficult to do assignments.

My Spanish teacher gave us an assignment sheet for a composition we had to write. It said to use the "subjunctive and conditional" tenses, but nothing else about it. I was confused because I didn't know how she wanted us to use them, or if they were the only tenses we could use.

In the same class I mention above the professor centered an assignment on the "aesthetics" surrounding music education. Now, this is a word that isn't even in the dictionary, and everyone has a different perception of its definition. To come to a mutual understanding, one must use description that many people can interpret in roughly the same way.

I remember in a science course, there were words that were difficult to understand. This made the goal of the assignment hard to determine. This made the assignment harder to complete even after asking for help. The assignment was eventually completed.

The assignment sheet was written by a zoology prof., so he wrote it in terms only a doctor could understand. The assignment has a researched project that required a lot of studying. Since the studying was done AFTER the paper was assigned, I had no idea what she wanted out of the paper.
APPENDIX F. ARGUMENT ASSIGNMENT SHEET

English 105

Final Argument

Assignment

You have already analyzed what you need to do to argue your topic; now write an argument paper of your final topic.

Dates & Format

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Materials Due</td>
<td>Wed., April 19</td>
<td>Length: 5-10 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline Due</td>
<td>Fri., April 21</td>
<td>Required Sources: 5 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Due</td>
<td>Mon., April 24</td>
<td>Include a Bibliography: see your bibliography handout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Paper Due</td>
<td>Fri., April 28</td>
<td>or the website notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(no late papers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Details

Think about your Persuasion Analysis papers and additional comments I gave you—these will help you understand how you need to write your argument.

When you write your argument, remember to think about the interaction between:

- the Rhetorical Situation (Audience, Purpose, and Context)
- the Rhetorical Tools (Logos, Ethos, and Pathos)
- your entire topic, not just your side of the argument

Audience - Who is your audience? What do they believe? Why? How does this impact your argument? What types of arguments will they best respond to? Don’t answer these in this paper, but make sure you follow them when addressing your audience.

Purpose - Why are you writing this paper? What is your goal? Stick to that goal; don’t stray from this goal or add in unrelated ideas. Make sure everything you argue relates to this goal.

Context - What is the situation? How does it affect people (and your argument)? Be sure you understand what related issues affect your topic, and know why.

Logos - Does your audience need facts? Make sure you use the right kinds of support to persuade.

Ethos - Don’t just think “testimonials”; think about your ethos. Showing you understand the whole topic and both sides of the argument will allow you to reach and hopefully persuade your audience.

Pathos - Does your audience respond to emotional appeals? If they need the facts, this may not work.

Your Topic - Show your audience you have a full understanding of the topic and both sides of the argument so they will be more likely to listen to what you have to say. Be sure to also achieve your purpose.

Purpose

This is the climax of English 105. The overall goal of this paper is for you to prove your understanding of what we’ve discussed in class about analyzing, arguing, and fully understanding a topic in order to have an educated viewpoint on the matter. Specifically, the goals include:

- to be able to establish yourself as an “expert” on your topic and provide some additional insight into the current debate over your topic
- to understand how the Rhetorical Situation impacts an argument, and to be able to address the Rhetorical Situation properly using Rhetorical Tools
- to learn how to appropriately (for your topic) address and persuade an audience

Evaluation

Your Final Argument will be evaluated on how well it accomplishes the following:

- shows an understanding of both sides of the debate over your topic and establishes credibility (through relating both sides and using sources)
- addresses the Rhetorical Situation (don’t tell me what it is, show me by the way you write your argument) and uses rhetorical tools that will convince your particular audience
- achieves the purpose you set out to accomplish through your paper (convince, educate, inform, enlighten, ask to consider, etc.)
- uses spelling, grammar, and punctuation which comply with standard rules of English
APPENDIX G. LATEST WRITING ASSIGNMENT SHEET VERSION

Analysis Paper
The overall goal of this assignment is to understand how an argument is constructed. Understanding your audience and why they believe what they believe will help you develop your own arguments in class.

Any good argument needs to understand the influences that change the way people view the issue. So we need to know what beliefs or situations might affect the way people feel about the issue. Once you choose a topic, I want you to fully explain how opinions are formed about that topic. For example:

- if you are analyzing your personality type, how you do or don't fit your type description, how this impacts your reading skills/studying/classroom personality, etc., you want to investigate why you are a certain way or how this impacts your academic career
- if you are analyzing an issue, explain how will people see it and why; what beliefs do they have that affect the way they feel about a particular topic

Argument Paper
The Argument requires understanding of the Analysis topics and may require Research strategies, depending on whether or not you need to support your Argument with others' arguments.

The overall goal of this paper is for you to prove your understanding of what we've discussed in class about analyzing, arguing, and fully understanding a topic in order to argue an educated viewpoint on the matter. Specifically, try to write so you:

- establish yourself as an "expert" on your topic and provide some additional insight into the current debate over your topic
- understand how different factors (like the audiences' stance, perception, etc.) impact an argument, and to be able to address these factors properly using effective argument strategies (like facts, affecting emotions, etc.)
- learn how to appropriately (for your topic) address and persuade an audience

Research Paper
If you accept the definition of "argument for the sake of knowledge," you need to be able to research information about your topic. Even if you don't like this definition, you should be knowledgeable about what you argue. Basically, when you create a research paper, you want to investigate a topic so you have arguments investigating all stances in your issue. So this paper should give you a better understanding of your topic.

Not only does research provide you with more knowledge of your topic; but research grants your own argument more credible by supporting your stance with statistics, facts, expert testimonials, etc.

Even though one of the purposes of the research paper is to gain knowledge about your topic, your paper still needs to have a thesis. Make a claim and support it through your research.
Journal 2: Neusner Response

Response

Write a response supporting or refuting Neusner's ideas in his article, "The Speech the Graduates Didn't Hear."

Think of the intended setting of this piece: a college graduation. Would a speech like this bore or captivate / challenge or enrage an audience? Why? What do you think the purpose of this article is? Why do you think I assign it to you? What kinds of responses do you think Neusner or I would hope to receive?

You may choose to focus on:

• What value does Neusner place on students' work and on grades?
• How does Neusner feel about his relationships with his students, and what are his feelings about their intellect?
• What differences does Neusner highlight between college life and "the real world"?

or any other issues you think are important in the article, then provide your own insight as to why you think these are important. Do you agree with Neusner? Why or why not?

Journal 8: Oral Argument Analysis

Analysis

Analyze an oral argument, such as:

• John F. Kennedy's "Cuban Missile Crisis Address"
• Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"
• Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"
• Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Pearl Harbour Address"

or another speech you find interesting.

Look at the different constructions between written arguments and oral arguments. Many written arguments would sound dry if presented; many oral arguments wouldn't seem logical if read. Why is this? What is the difference between effective written and oral arguments and the way they are constructed?

You may want to focus on analyzing a certain aspect of the argument:

• What impact does this speech have when delivered vs. when read? Why is it more persuasive when spoken? How could the speech have different effects depending on whether it is written or spoken?
• What techniques does the speech use that would be ineffective in a written argument? Why are they effective here? Why would they be ineffective if written?
• Are spoken or written arguments more effective in persuading their audiences? Why? What makes them more effective?

Remember, when you are analyzing, you want to understand why certain techniques are more effective in oral presentation than they would be in a written argument. How does this effective in spoken argument?
REFERENCES


