



## SEQUENCING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

---

Faculty can improve the quality of student writing by designing assignments that build upon student skills as an assignment unfolds (Lindemann). Breaking up a writing assignment into a series of steps or stages can dramatically improve student performance. At a minimum, intervening during writing prevents students from turning in last-minute, poorly considered papers and gives students feedback—whether from you or from other students—at useful points in the development of their papers.

**Sequencing** assignments can be as straightforward as establishing official checkpoints as students develop their drafts. You might require them to submit a thesis and plan for your approval and commentary, followed by a rough draft one or two weeks before the final draft. This checkpointing guarantees that students won't write the whole paper in one sitting, giving them time to let their ideas develop. Additionally, if you see students heading towards plagiarism, you can show them how to correctly use, paraphrase, and cite sources.

A related form of sequencing, called **scaffolding** (see below), launches students on fairly simple assignments and moves them gradually through more difficult cognitive tasks as they build expertise in your discipline. Using guidelines such as Bloom's taxonomy (see below), you can identify specific activities and develop successive assignments that draw on increasingly complex thinking skills.

There are several other benefits of sequencing assignments:

- Provides coherence for the course, helping students align their writing with the aims of the course. Writing assignments no longer appear to be stand-alone activities.
- Promotes complex thought through progressive focusing, revising, and attending to different points of view.
- Mirrors the staged and sometimes collaborative way work is often done in the professional world.
- Uses your responding/grading time more effectively. Since you may stage and respond to a thesis, plans, sections, or full drafts, you will be familiar with the end product. Because students have heard from you (or peers) throughout, your grading of the final draft can go more smoothly and efficiently.

## WAYS OF SEQUENCING ASSIGNMENTS

Sequencing writing assignments allows for a wide range of options in any discipline.

- When introducing the assignment, have students spend five minutes **prewriting**—freely writing about the topic. Just one unexpected idea buried in a messy prewrite may become the germ of the paper.
- **Encourage planning** activities, especially visual diagramming of one sort or another. Lists, idea trees, tables of what is known or not known, and concept maps can all work well, too (see Flower).
- Expand the student's writing process by **requiring multiple drafts**, which can include any of the following suggestions:
  - Encourage students to write a *zero draft*, one designed to help them generate ideas – both good and bad – as they develop their focus or working thesis. The beauty of a *zero draft* is that no one else has to see it.
  - Ask students to submit a *thesis draft* with a working thesis, rough outline, and rationale.
  - Alternately, require a *document prototype*—a planning document mapping the purpose of the report, intended audiences or users, major sections, line of argument, main issues treated in each section, and visuals that slot into various sections (tables, graphs, diagrams, photos).



- Another draft could be a *first full (or conference) draft* that receives your quick responses to its content (or students submit written questions about the content and scope of their projects after they have completed their first draft). After receiving direction from you, students revise for unity, support, and coherence or to tighten up an argument, for example.
  - This *revised draft* could then be reviewed by students in writing groups. Peers not only help each other, but also they see strengths in other papers that suggest further revisions.
  - In an *oral draft*, the student presents the core ideas of the paper orally either to the class or in a small group. Preparing for the oral presentation can help show a student where ideas may still not be clear. Further, written evaluations (from you, the class, or a small group) may suggest additional points of view or questions that may be worth incorporating into the final draft. Having two or three students volunteer to present oral drafts will help them with their work and provide an example to other students.
  - An *editing draft* can also be used to launch sentence-level editing. Students should not fuss over grammar and punctuation in early drafts when they are likely to be deleting sections, adding support, or reorganizing material. After global revisions have been made, they can focus on style and grammar. That completed, they proofread and turn in their *final draft*.
- **Set up small writing groups** of three to five students each. They can meet in or out of class to critique one another's drafts. If you use WebCT or other technology tools, group members can post questions about their writing process or their drafts and respond by given dates.
  - **Use a jigsaw approach**, where students do initial sections of research and writing as determined by their group and then connect their pieces to those of their group mates. Or, if groups can meet in a computer lab, students bring in drafts and collaboratively integrate them into a single paper. Stress the difficulty and importance of blending contributions from team members into a seamless document.
  - **Use a logical sequence**. Create a sequence of shorter assignments that build to the final written project. In technical or scientific projects, students would initially create a proposal. One or more progress reports would follow. Finally, students would write the final document itself. Alternately, students might first develop a topic bibliography, then annotate it, then write a literature review on the basis of the bibliography, then write a paper synthesizing what is known into an argument for what research ought to be done.
  - **Write parts of the whole**. Students submit segments of the final paper—literature review, methods, results, tables, bibliography, etc.—throughout the term with time to integrate the whole at the end. The introduction might be the last piece submitted with the whole draft.
  - **Encourage conferences** well in advance of due dates. Invite students to confer with you, a TA, or someone in the Writing Center throughout the semester about works in progress. For example, you encourage them to attend conferences prepared with three specific questions or with copies of sources.

## SCAFFOLDING ASSIGNMENTS

Students who are excellent writers in one field such as history can appear to be poor thinkers or novice writers when they encounter entirely new disciplines such as physics or biology. They are prepared to play checkers. However, by semester's end, you want them thinking and writing at a higher level, prepared to play chess.

Using a scale such as **Bloom's taxonomy** (shown below), you develop assignments introducing your students to your discipline at a level where they can have early success and then develop their critical thinking and writing skills. Bloom's categories chart growing cognitive complexity. Activities associated with the simpler skills are more accessible to novice learners than those associated with analysis, synthesis, or evaluation. As students develop greater understanding of the subject matter and problems, you can add progressively more cognitively difficult assignments. For an excellent discussion of scaffolding, visit the Colorado School of Mines website, which provides the chart below and course-specific examples of scaffolding.



## Bloom's Taxonomy

Know	Comprehend	Apply	Analyze	Synthesize	Evaluate
repeat, list, name, cite, relate, tell, <i>define</i> , etc.	translate, report, describe, retell, explain, discuss, <i>summarize</i> , recognize, etc.	apply, show, solve, simulate, operate, experiment, <i>calculate</i> , etc.	interpret, test, examine, <i>differentiate</i> , distinguish, investigate, etc.	predict, plan, <i>hypothesize</i> , incorporate, invent, propose, formulate, etc.	judge, assess, revise, measure, <i>recommend</i> , criticize, evaluate, determine, etc.

Scaffolding breaks up a complex cognitive task into manageable tasks. Note that each of the terms characterizing the mental act (e.g. *define*, *summarize*, *calculate*, *differentiate*, *hypothesize*, *recommend*) can also serve to define a purpose for writing. Each is an active verb, something students would be asked to do in writing. For example, a geophysics instructor might assign a project with four successive writing components: problem definition, audience analysis, interpretation of results, and final problem-solving evaluation. You can scaffold assignments in any of the following ways:

- Maintain a consistent rhetorical task, but continue to **increase the difficulty** of the readings.
- Challenge students to **investigate gradually more complex subjects**. A succession of brief reading or writing tasks may be connected to a single subject, offering students conflicting points of view or competing interpretations. Ultimately, students might define a problem, then interpret current research, propose solutions, and, finally, synthesize competing perspectives into an integrated argument.
- **Vary the audience**. Students take core information and write it up for different audiences for different purposes, moving from the familiar to the less familiar (beginning with nonmajors, to fellow majors, to professionals in your discipline). Each change would require different tasks, more extensive knowledge, and control of the language of the field.
- **Alter the genre**. Here, writing assignments progress from simpler to more complex modes of discourse (students might begin with a personal response in their journal, to formal definition, to comparison; or from field data, to summary, to research article). To streamline grading time, the earlier papers could receive a few points or check/check plus/minus, with the final paper earning the major points.
- **Reflect on learning** through the term. Early on, students summarize their understanding of key topics. They revisit this later, reconsidering their early thinking based on deeper understanding.

### USEFUL SOURCES:

Bean, J.C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking; and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Flower, L. *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*. New York: Harcourt, 1998.

Lindemann, E. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press. 2001.

Sequencing in general/ developing assignments:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/forum/assignments.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/writing/Faculty/createeffective.html#sequencing>

