

INTENSIVE WRITING CURRICULAR APPROACH: EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS DESIGN

The article focuses on effective assignment design strategies and shares some classroom activities aimed at generating ideas for assignment development.

Key words: Curricular Approach, Writing Assignments Design, intensive writing methodology, important principles.

В статье рассматриваются эффективные стратегии разработки заданий и некоторых классных упражнений, направленных на генерирование идей для развития мышления студентов.

Ключевые слова: каррикулярный подход, дизайн письменных заданий, интенсивная методология письма, важные принципы.

For the past 4 to 5 years one of the core curricular approaches to teaching courses in American Studies, as well as any other courses at AUCA, has become an intensive writing approach. AUCA started redesigning its Curriculum in accordance with Liberal Arts Education tradition in 2010. The intensive writing approach became the foundation of an innovative interdisciplinary course for AUCA freshmen (First Year Seminar) which was first included in AUCA Curriculum in Fall 2010. Earlier, in the Spring Semester 2010 a team of AUCA professors taught a pilot course of Introduction to Liberal Arts which was an experimental project aimed at exposing both AUCA professors and students to the challenges of Liberal Arts Education tradition with a focus on the intensive writing course component. All AUCA degree granting departments, including the American Studies Department, were strongly encouraged to develop and introduce intensive writing courses or incorporate the writing component into the existing courses of AUCA Curriculum. In addition, a team of AUCA professors selected to teach First Year Seminar and other courses with the writing component went through a series of extensive trainings in terms of intensive writing methodology which is widely practiced at Bard College, AUCA official partner. The trainings

were arranged by Bard College visiting scholars who traveled to Bishkek annually in fall and in summer. Many AUCA professors, including the author of this publication, traveled to Bard to attend Professional Development Summer Workshop to acquire innovative writing approaches, methods and techniques. As a result, the author of the article introduced the intensive writing component in the required course of Early American Literature and the elective course of Native American Literature both of which were offered in American Studies Department.

The goal of this publication is to share practical experience of developing writing assignments based on the principles of the intensive writing methodology acquired at Bard College. The methodology reflects the intensive writing curricular approach used at AUCA. The article focuses on effective assignment design strategies and shares some classroom activities aimed at generating ideas for assignment development. It provides assignments' samples for required and elective courses in Early American Literature and Native American Literature. The assignment development process includes important steps which can help organize the structure of assignments logically and coherently. The article lists the steps and comments on each of them. Assignments' wording is also very crucial for

students, so the article provides some vocabulary (a brief list of key verbs) to be used in the assignments. Finally, the article recommends some on-line resources to be used in the classroom. The resources enable the students to understand the assignments and to follow the assignments' steps by means of assignment interpretation guidelines.

Intensive Writing approach based on Bard College writing methodology is one of the core approaches to various students' skills development at AUCA. It creates a transition for American Studies students from the basic writing skills developed in Freshmen Seminar to advanced writing skills with emphasis on research. Writing is a really effective learning tool. If used on a regular basis, it stimulates the development of holistic, creative, analytical and critical thinking skills. Classroom writing activities teach students to arrange their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner, which leads to proper organization and structure of their papers. In addition, writing is a process. If professors arrange it properly and guide students through all its challenges, students easily acquire good time-management, decision-making and problem-solving skills and become efficient learners.

Writing assignment design should follow very simple, yet really important principles. First, it is necessary *to write out the assignments and provide students with handouts*. Thus, the assignment becomes "visible to the students"; they do not have to worry about forgetting it. It is also good if the handout provides students with choices. They usually choose what they feel more comfortable with. Secondly, it is important *to clearly name what students should do*. They have to know the exact steps to follow. The third thing to mention is that there *should be key words (preferably verbs) in the assignment*. They will make the assignment explicit and focus-oriented and urge students to act. The brief list of the key words is comprised of the following action verbs: *analyze, explain the significance of, express your view on, critique, explore, support, reflect on, define/identify, outline, argue, focus on, discuss, compare/contrast, and develop a clear set of arguments*. The next principle is *to take some time in the classroom to prepare students to succeed at the paper*. Ultimately, it makes sense *to develop smaller assignments first to prepare students for larger assignments* later. Actually, smaller assignments can and should be incorporated in the larger papers. If professors follow this principle,

they help their students to manage time efficiently and motivate them to treat the writing process as a one-step-at-a-time slow process.

The process of assignment development is comprised of three major stages: 1. assignment predevelopment activities and strategies; 2. assignment development process; 3. in-class assignment analysis.

The first stage is based on in-class activities and is aimed at preparation for the actual assignment development process. The following is a list of possible in-class activities:

1. Generating ideas for paper topics in the classroom:
 - a. Have your students read significant passage/s from the text.
 - b. Expose your students to the writing prompt: What is/are the most significant point/s or issues in the passage? List them and briefly explain what makes you think so.
2. Brainstorming for potential topic ideas and making up a list of them on the board.
3. Sorting out the best ideas (creativity and originality are the most important criteria).
4. Helping students formulate the ideas (appoint 2 or 3 students who will be writing down all the topics).
5. Require the students who were taking notes in class to type them and send them to you by email.

The second stage of assignment development process is done by the professor outside the classroom. The recommendations below focus on how it can be arranged:

1. Make a shortlist of ideas (limit them to 3 or 4) (Is the idea original/creative? Is it narrow enough?).
2. Develop a brief set of questions about the idea.
3. Clearly describe your expectations about the paper content.
4. Describe structural and technical paper requirements.

In-class assignment analysis should follow the guidelines below:

1. Read the assignment prompt the entire way through once. This gives you an overall view of what is going on.
2. Underline or circle the portions that you absolutely must know. This information may include due date, research (source) requirements, page length, and format (MLA, APA, CMS).

3. Underline or circle important phrases. You should know your professor at least a little by now - what phrases does he/she use in class? Does he/she repeatedly say a specific word? If these are in the prompt, you know the instructor wants you to use them in the assignment.

4. Think about how you will address the prompt. The prompt contains clues on how to write the assignment. Your instructor will often describe the ideas she wants discussed either in questions, in bullet points, or in the text of the prompt. Think about each of these sentences and number them so that you can write a paragraph or section of your essay on that portion if necessary.

5. Rank ideas in descending order, from most important to least important. Instructors may include more questions or talking points than you can cover in your assignment, so rank them in the order you think is more important. One area of the prompt may be more interesting to you than another.

6. Ask your instructor questions if you have any.¹³

The samples of assignments for Early American Literature and Native American Literature Courses were developed based on the principles and procedures described above.

SAMPLE 1. Persuasive Essay Assignment for Early American Literature.

Write a *well-organized argumentative* essay on one of the topics below. The essay should *contain a clear thesis statement* and *express your own opinion* on the topic. You should *use quotes* from the texts we read *to support your points* (MLA style).

1. Frederic Douglas is a champion of human rights. *Persuade* the reader that his life has become the heroic paradigm for all oppressed people in the US. Your *logical arguments* should *be based on/or supported by* examples from either his life or his narrative.

2. Emily Dickinson is/is not a unique American poet. *Persuade* the reader that it is/is not so. *Develop a set of strong arguments* focusing on the *most important features* of her poetry, such as *style, rhyme, form* and *subject matter*.

3. From the list of authors that you read throughout the course choose one that you find most (least) outstanding and *persuade* the reader that he/she is really worth (not worth) reading.

Please, *appeal to logic*, not emotions and *support your logical arguments with quotes* from the texts of the author.

SAMPLE 2. Research Paper Assignment for Native American Literature.

You are required to write 2 short papers for this course.

The first paper should *focus on oral tradition* literature. I expect you to either *choose two versions of the same tale* coming from different tribes and *describe their similarities and differences* or *compare some tale (or a character) from American Indian literature* with a *tale (a character) from the Kyrgyz folklore* or the *folklore of the culture that you represent*. You should *identify the topic early* in the semester. September 30 is the deadline for submission of your first paper topic proposal to be approved by the instructor. The deadline for your first paper is October 10.

The second paper should *be based on one of the novels' excerpts* which you will read during the course. It can be *a reaction paper expressing your impressions* of the reading. You can also *focus on a Native American tradition, custom, ritual or ceremony* described in some of the novels and *compare or contrast it with a similar tradition, custom, ceremony or ritual in Kyrgyz culture*. The second *paper topic proposal is due* on November 28 and the paper itself is due on December 12.

Length: minimum 5 pages double spaced, Times New Roman, 12.

Structure: the paper must have an introduction, a clear thesis statement well developed and supported by sufficient evidence, and a thorough conclusion.

Content: papers must *analyze* tales and novels, not summarize them. Plot summaries, quotations and paraphrases should be kept to a minimum. The text of the paper *must consist* mainly of *your own writing and thinking*. The deadlines for the papers are indicated in the daily schedule of the syllabus. Each of the papers is worth 15%.

Finally, there are some useful on-line resources the author of the article uses on a regular basis to enhance students' writing skills. The resources contain useful tools to help professors with assignments design. These links have thorough and helpful information about virtually every part of the academic writing process:

¹³The guidelines for in-class assignment analysis were borrowed from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/688/01/>

ВЕСТНИК МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА КЫРГЫЗСТАНА

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/toc.shtml>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

<http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/english/writing/esl.htm>

www.cob.sjsu.edu/facstaff/nellen_a/time_management.htm

www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/acad/strat/

www.csbsju.edu/academicadvising/aa-sbj.htm

www.muskingum.edu/home/cal/

www.clt.cornell.edu/campus/learn/LSC Resources/cornellsystem.pdf

http://cstw.osu.edu/writingcenter/handouts/apa_references

<http://cstw.osu.edu/writingcenter/handouts/MLA>

<http://cstw.osu.edu/writingcenter/handouts/chicagostyle>