Assigning Real-world Genres

Our assignments are often designed to teach specific skills or habits of mind that are transferable to other, more real-world contexts. A compare and contrast essay, for example, won’t be assigned outside the classroom context, but students will certainly be expected to produce logically organized, evidence-based comparisons. In some cases, however, you might consider assigning student work that hews more closely to real-world genres. Projects that reflect real-world genres clarify an assignment’s purpose for students, facilitate the development of audience awareness in communication, and provide intrinsic motivation for success. These assignments facilitate metacognition, and, for the instructor, can have the benefit of producing greater variety in students’ work, enlivening the process of responding to student writing. Depending on how you implement them, they may also provide students a readership or other audience that extends beyond the classroom into public communities, thereby enhancing experiential learning.

Some ways to design meaningful real-world genre assignments:

- Backward plan from your learning goals, identifying the skills you want students to master.
- Identify the real-world genres in your field (e.g., white papers, memos, pitches, op-eds, peer-reviewed journal articles).
- Identify real-world genres that span academic disciplines and general audiences (e.g., letters to the editor, interviews, websites).
- Select purposefully from these options, accounting not only for your learning goals but also issues like feasibility, depth of impact, and the needs of the genre’s audience.
- Build a scaffolded assignment series that includes or leads up to real-world genre assignments.
- Share model texts to familiarize students with the genre’s audience, purpose, and rhetorical moves.
- Consider providing access to the real-world context itself (e.g., have students present at a community board meeting, bring an executive to class for a case discussion on that guest’s company, or have students submit their letters to the editor to a local or student newspaper).

References

See also
Metacognition
Responding to Student Writing
Scaffolding Student Learning