

Assignment Alternatives

Seminar on Supporting Active Learning in Jumbo Courses

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Depending on your learning goals, you might find that an alternative to a traditional final assignment is both more productive for students (helping them develop skills in a more targeted exercise) and more manageable for you (presenting easier and possibly more enjoyable grading).

Some of these assignment ideas might replace more traditional final deliverables. Others might serve as scaffolding toward your higher-stakes deliverable – opportunities for students to develop progressively toward mastery of skills. Scaffolding student learning results in deeper learning and greater capacity for retention and transfer, but that’s not all! If students receive (even minimal!) guidance on shorter, smaller, earlier assignments, they will produce stronger work on final products, meaning less for you to do on those longer, more high-stakes deliverables.

What follows are a series of assignment building blocks and thought starters. Some are short, likely to target a single skill or set of skills. Consider assigning several that culminate in a portfolio. Others might, with tailoring for your purposes, potentially replace a more traditional final deliverable.

Short position papers. Students can write these frequently and concisely, taking positions on central issues raised in reading or in class. You can also have them practice writing position papers for opposing views.

Drafting with templates. Students can use templates you provide to practice key disciplinary moves (e.g. “Although some people think ____, I argue that ____, with the caveat that ____.”). See *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing* for an index of templates. Note that sharing “language-chunks” is especially useful for multilingual students.

Short “real-world” genres that prioritize concision. Short forms – like abstracts, memos, op-eds, proposals, emails with specific rhetorical functions (e.g. sum up and identify next steps following a group project meeting), bulleted lists with logical hierarchical ordering and consistent syntax – demand high-order synthesis and push students to practice self-editing skills. Thus, in spite of, or *because of*, their concision, they can actually demand quite high-level work from students. In addition, these kinds of assignments invite students into the discipline’s real-world writing contexts.

Short research exercises. Students can be asked to outline a research paper without drafting it, annotate a few entries in a bibliography, develop three alternative research methodologies for the same experiment, reverse outline a research paper you’ve assigned as reading, etc.

Evidence, analysis, and claims map. For argument-based writing, students can draft maps of each step of their argument, indicating in a non-prose format (such as bullet points in a chart or keywords in a diagram) what pieces of evidence they plan to use to support each sub-claim and what analysis or reasoning is needed to explain the evidence’s relevance to the claim.

Research poster mock-ups. For disciplines in which poster presentations are common, students can be asked to produce quick mock ups. Laying out the poster can help students master research methods, and drafting bullet points for each section can help students practice extracting key data

and talking points. They can do this for their own research, or for experiments from their reading (as if they were the research team presenting that project).

Thesis statement and outline. Similarly, it can be productive to ask students to submit a draft thesis statement and tentative outline to receive feedback from you, each other, or even a structured self-review process. Thesis statement drafting is most effective once students have already conducted some relevant research and engaged in prewriting to develop their thinking.

Drafts or partial drafts. Assigning drafts can be an effective way of underscoring the processual nature of writing.

Mock conference or awards ceremony. Students imagine they are planning an event that will bring together leading authors or thinkers in a particular field. They must design a seating chart, panel discussion pairings, and/or any number of other events, along with explanations of the logic behind their pairings and arrangements, including, for example, what discussions or disagreements are likely to arise at each seating table. Students might be asked to justify their own placement within the proceedings. The premise can be as realistic or fantastical as the context and learning goals demand.

Discipline-specific alternative assignments. For example, write: a profile of a major figure in the field; a myth or parable that reflects disciplinary understanding of the role of these texts in your field; an essay or letter from the perspective of someone else; a personal narrative about your engagement with the discipline; a dialogue between two or several major figures in the field; a collection of letters to the editor from multiple perspectives; a news article about the potential impact of discoveries made in a scientific experiment.

Collaborative writing. The benefits of assigning paired or group writing in terms of reducing feedback time are obvious, and students can learn a great deal about the writing process through collaborative writing. In some disciplines multi-authored writing is common; in others, less so, but there are creative options with some corollaries in the “real world” in most fields. For example, students might collaboratively produce text for a curated public history museum exhibit, a call for proposals for a themed conference, or an artist collective or organization’s mission statement. When assigning collaborative writing, instructors will need to provide guidance on the process.