

A Selection of Shorter, Non-traditional, and Real-world Genre Assignments

The following are some ideas for writing and speaking assignment variations that are relatively short. You might find that shorter and less traditional assignment variations are both more productive for your students and more manageable for you (presenting easier and possibly more enjoyable grading) in comparison to more formal academic papers and presentations.

These assignment ideas might be incorporated as the primary communications-based component in an otherwise quantitatively-oriented course. Some might replace more traditional final deliverables like research papers or formal presentations. Or, many could serve as scaffolding toward a 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.

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.

Short “real-world” genres that prioritize concision. Short forms – like abstracts, memos, op-eds, research proposals, executive summaries, emails with specific rhetorical functions (e.g. sum up and identify next steps following a group project meeting), advice columns in a specialized newspaper – 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 “real-world” professional simulations. Similarly, oral communication simulations of professional contexts can call upon students to concisely apply content knowledge toward a clear goal. For example, students can be assigned to verbally walk a hypothetical client through a spreadsheet calculating projections related to their personal finances, or to prepare a list of questions they’ll need to ask a non-technical expert in order to determine how to address a technical problem.

Analysis of “real-world” writing. Getting students to observe what makes for effective writing in a specific content area helps them appreciate the practical and context-specific role of communication skills. For example, students can compare and contrast how two different textbooks introduce the same concept and determine which version they find most helpful, or explore a “conversation” happening currently in a particular industry’s trade publications or blogs.

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 research question, reverse outline a research paper you’ve assigned as reading, etc.

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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 thinkers or practitioners in a particular field or sector. 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.

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 organization's mission statement or policy. When assigning collaborative writing, instructors will need to provide guidance on the process.