

## A Sample Writing Assignment

A student responding to the following assignment felt totally at sea, with good reason:

Write an essay describing the various conceptions of property found in your readings and the different arguments for and against the distribution of property and the various justifications of, and attacks on, ownership. Which of these arguments has any merits? What is the role of property in the various political systems discussed? The essay should concentrate on Hobbes, Locke, and Marx.

“How am I supposed to structure the essay?” the student asked. “Address the first question, comparing the three guys? Address the second question, doing the same, etc.? . . . Do I talk about each author separately in terms of their conceptions of the nation, and then have a section that compares their arguments, or do I have a 4 part essay which is really 4 essays (two pages each) answering each question? What am I going to put in the intro, and the conclusion?” Given the tangle of ideas presented in the assignment, the student’s panic and confusion are understandable.

A better-formulated assignment poses significant challenges, but one of them is *not* wondering what the instructor secretly wants. Here’s a possible revision, which follows the guidelines suggested above:

<p>[Course Name and Title] [Instructor’s Name]</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Paper #2</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Due date: Thursday, February 24, at 11:10am in section Length: 5-6pp. double-spaced</p> <p>Limiting your reading to the sourcebook, write a comparative analysis of Hobbes’s, Locke’s, and Marx’s conceptions of property.</p> <p>The purpose of this assignment is to help you synthesize some difficult political theory and identify the profound differences among some key theorists.</p> <p>The best papers will focus on a single shared aspect of the theorists’ respective political ideologies, such as how property is distributed, whether it should be owned, or what role it serves politically. The best papers will not only focus on a specific topic, but will state a clear and arguable thesis about it (“the three authors have differing conceptions of property” is neither) and go on to describe and assess the authors’ viewpoints clearly and concisely.</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Note that this revised assignment is now not only clearer than the original; it also requires less regurgitation and more sustained thought.

## Assignment Design

How you formulate your writing assignments will have an enormous impact on how well students write in response. The most important principle to keep in mind is this one: *You get what you ask for.* If the assignment is unfocused or inexact, you're likely to see unfocused, inexact papers. If it asks students to regurgitate material, you're likely to see descriptive answers rather than well-argued essays. If the assignment requires too many complex skills too early on, you're likely to see struggle and defeat, and to get stuck reading a pile of papers whose main flaws you indirectly caused.

Your writing assignment should contain the following elements:

- ***The assignment.*** Surprisingly, many instructors forget to include the crucial ingredient: the assignment itself. At least one sentence on your assignment sheet should explicitly state what you want students to do. The assignment is usually signaled by a verb, such as "analyze," "assess," "explain," or "discuss." For example, in a history course, after reading a model biography, students were directed as follows:

Your assignment is to write your own biographical essay on Mao, using Mao's reminiscences (as told to a Western journalist), speeches, encyclopedia articles, a medical account from Mao's physician, and two contradictory obituaries.

- ***The purpose of the assignment.*** Explaining to students why they're doing a particular assignment can help them grasp the big picture—what you're trying to teach them and why learning it is worthwhile. For example,

This assignment has three goals: for you to (1) see how the concepts we've learned thus far can be used in a different field from economics, (2) learn how to write about a model, and (3) learn to critique a model or how to defend one.

- ***Approaches to the assignment.*** When faced with a big block of questions or a page-long rumination on the topic(s) by the instructor, students may have difficulty figuring out exactly which part of the assignment is the actual task required of them and which part is advice for performing this task. One strategy is to separate the assignment itself from methods for approaching it, questions to consider, and pitfalls to avoid. For example,

The most successful papers will have a tight focus. Don't attempt to include all of the suggested topics or comparison passages in your essay. Make an argument based on a close reading of a few carefully selected passages and be sure to make both your argument and the texts that will support that argument clear in the opening paragraph of your paper.

Be sure to provide a fair treatment of both sides of the question while at the same time showing why your side is the more persuasive of the two.