BEYOND THE SECRET DECODER RING:

Guidelines for Constructing Assignments That Fulfill Rather Than Frustrate Student and Teacher Expectations

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When I am disappointed with my students' performance on an assignment, I have learned to revisit the assignment text as one indicator of what may have "gone wrong." On such occasions, I now ask: What role, if any, might this instructional text have played in their poor performance?

The lesson of my best effort to assemble a Sauder bookcase, which resulted in what my friends generously labeled "the leaning tower of cultural critique," has not been lost on me: **sometimes the directions are less than adequate for the task**. Are there ever cases when we faculty frustrate even our most diligent students' efforts to perform? This discussion is designed to help my colleagues more fully demonstrate our role as rhetoricians when we compose and assign written work.

My experience at the Oakland University Writing Center has reinforced my appreciation for well-crafted directions. The first step toward fulfilling this expectation is for instructors to put each assignment into writing. We should consider each assignment a contract, one that cannot be accurately conveyed and affirmed without a written document.

Because a significant number of writing center consultations address assignment confusion—albeit often the result of a student's failure to read the directions—the writing consultant will first seek to determine if the student has correctly inferred the task. Helping students to negotiate a writing task can be difficult enough when a written guide is present, but this effort becomes potentially tedious when the assignment resides only in a student's memory or in her notes. In many classrooms, the assignment text is the only indication faculty members offer students of our ability to do that which we teach. Therefore, each faculty member must commit himself/herself to placing the assignment in writing. While I am aware that instructors offer many reasons for asking students to put the assignment into their own words—personal responsibility, critical thinking, etc.—I believe that these laudable aims are outweighed by the faculty's responsibility to clearly articulate the assignment in a less transient form.

In addition to anticipating student needs and documenting our disciplinary and assignment specific expectations, a written and retrievable assignment—not simply a recording of it on the board—shows empathy for specific constituencies like the Asperger's student of whom our College of Education colleague Jan Graetz has defined as s/he who struggles with "long strings of verbal instructions." Likewise, Kresge librarian Shaun Lombardo has reminded us that our failure to articulate a clear and written assignment might inadvertently encourage our students to take liberties with the sources from which they borrow.

With all of these considerations in mind, I would ask us to consider the following stage-appropriate assignment questions as we prepare or refine our next assignment:

When Drafting the Assignment:

- Does my assignment demonstrate rhetorical awareness? What is the purpose of my assignment? Who are my students (audience)? What "commonplaces" will help students to understand what I am asking them to

accomplish? Does my tone invite students to embrace the challenge?

- Do I use rhetorically accurate verbs to describe each writing task? I doubt that students gain specific insight on an assignment that instructs them to "write a paper," so it must indicate the following: What kind of writing is being sought? What thinking skills are we asking students to employ? Is the text a proposal, an analysis, a description, an argument, etc.? Are students asked to analyze, propose, define, opine, describe, inform, explore, synthesize, illustrate, theorize, report, justify, etc.? Do students understand how these processes are potentially distinct from one another?
- Do my formatting instructions go beyond directions to consult the appropriate documentation style manual and to draft a paper of a certain length? What other guidance must I offer? Can students use the first person? How many sources and what type of sources should they cite? How should the paper be organized? As I prepared to assign a literature review this semester, I quickly determined that it was not enough for me to ask students to "write a literature review." Why? First, literature reviews adhere to disciplinary constraints of which most entering college students are unfamiliar. Furthermore, a literature review can be organized by genre, by chronology, by theme, etc. While I asked students not to substitute an annotated bibliography for a literature review, I did not see the lightbulbs click on above their heads until I placed a synthesis of several academic sources, organized by theme, next to an annotated bibliography. They became more engaged when we constructed a whole-class literature review from assigned scholarly sources that addressed the question: Should medical professionals with treatable mental illnesses be allowed to treat patients?
- Do I offer "tell and show" examples? My classroom motto is "show me." Therefore, my assignments should with-

stand the same interrogation. Do I offer students ample evidence of that which I seek?

- If I mandate a specific documentation style like Chicago, have I acknowledged that there are two versions of Chicago documentation: one for the social sciences and sciences (author-date) and one for the humanities (bibliographic note system)? Have I recommended an accessible, course-level appropriate resource guide? In the best case, can I offer students an annotated paper that explicitly draws their attention to many of the documentation features they can be expected to demonstrate?
- Would I be able to complete this assignment myself? Could I have done this assignment with a novice's diction and reading skills?
- Have I clearly articulated my evaluation criteria? Would my students benefit from a specific grading rubric for some/all assignments?
- Have I built self-assessment into the submission process?

When Introducing the Assignment:

- Do I offer students an opportunity to ask questions and to generate initial ideas before they leave class on the day a new assignment is given?
- How might I more effectively query student understanding of the assignment?
- Do I clearly explain the connection between the assignment and course goals?
- Are my assignments clearly sequenced? Do I demonstrate how this assignment builds upon the previous assignment and anticipates the next?
- How might I help students to envision that which I seek? Should I have them read or annotate a text that satisfies the assignment? Should I direct students to other resources that further describe/support the kind of writing that I have introduced?

- Have I explained any new terms, genres, or assignment formats that need clarification?
- Have I built time management into the assignment? Should I stage the assignment so that I can redirect a struggling student before the text is due?
- Have I explained the criteria on which the work will be evaluated?
- Will the student have an opportunity to submit a draft for preliminary feedback or revise the graded paper for a better grade? If so, under what conditions?

When Assessing the Paper:

- Does my draft feedback focus on what composition practitioners deem higher order concerns first? In other words, do I address issues of organization and evidence before I mark typographical errors and grammatical agreement problems in sentences that may not make the cut to a final draft?
- Are my comments and grading criteria consistent with the assignment goals? In other words, if I say the goal of the assignment is to express creative solutions to a global problem but I only offer feedback on syntax, am I offering mixed messages about my values?
- Is my feedback offered with an eye toward revision and toward having a conversation with the student author about his/her work, or is it provided simply to "justify" the grade?
- Will the student understand how to interpret my notations? If I use proofreading/editing abbreviations, symbols, and jargon, will the student know how to translate them?
- Do I offer a balance of marginal comments/questions and end commentary?

ADDENDUM:
Instructor Comments and the Purposes They Serve

(with Carol Burns, OUWC Writing Consultant)

In our experience at the Oakland University Writing Center, students hope to glean, among other things, the following clues from instructor feedback to their writing:

- Guidance on how to rewrite a text;
- Identification of error patterns, mistakes, oversights, etc; and a
- Rationale for the grades they earn.

Writing consultants seek to gather the following cues from instructor comments:

- Overview of steps students might take to learn and improve both the individual assignment and the author's proficiency;
- Reduction of "guess work" as they try to help the student understand the evaluation and suggestions;
- Support for their efforts to help students who are resistant to consultant recommendations; and a
- Model for writing assistance.

Helpful comments include:

- Clear feedback on what needs to be improved, particularly at the end of a paper;
- Marginal questions directed at specific passages; and
- Critical comments directed at revision, not at grade justification.

Unhelpful comments are often:

- Invisible. Please write comments on papers! They provide invaluable information;
- Premature. Consider reading the complete text once through before documenting necessary changes;

- Caustic and damaging to a student's confidence and spirit;
- Ambiguous or non-specific. Why is a particular phrase underlined with a wavy line? To what do the abbreviations/editing notation refer? What does fuzzy syntax mean? (Please remember what it is like to be on the other side of the assignment);
- Exhaustive. Pick your battles. Research demonstrates that copious annotations overwhelm and/or confuse students.

In conclusion, if students require a "secret decoder ring" to access faculty feedback and/or a therapist to heal from said evaluation, then the comments will facilitate neither learning nor revision.