

Writing Better Workshop Assignments

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The easiest way to kill a workshop session is to provide students and tutors with poor instructions. A good workshop assignment should:

A. Be connected to the work in class

The best assignments scaffold or preview work done in class. Students want to see tutoring as a productive time, and they want to see the connections between what is being done in the WC to what is being done in class. The tutoring center can serve as an extension of your class, a place for students to continue what they have started, or to start something that will be finished in class. Make the connections clear and evident for tutors and students.

Example: In class we are working on critically reading a text. I would like for tutors to help students master this skill. Have students complete a Double Entry Journal (DEJ) on the attached article. A basic outline on how to do DEJ's is attached as well. You can tell students that this DEJ will be used in our next class meeting to facilitate a discussion of rhetorical effectiveness.

B. Be easily understood

Even a great assignment can be lost in translation. Many classrooms have site-specific language or terms that are defined in class. Avoid these terms in WC assignments, since tutors will likely be unfamiliar with your own class-jargon. Also, keep your instructions succinct but sufficiently detailed. An extremely lengthy instruction can be as distracting and tough to decipher as a very short one. Find the middle ground and use clear language.

Example: Today, I want students to craft a Rhetorical Precis during the workshop session. (A definition of Rhetorical Precis is attached, and the students have a handout that explicates the Precis.) Have students read the article on page 24 in their textbooks. Discuss the article, discuss the process of writing a Precis, then move into composing a Precis on this article. If time remains, try finding a short news article on an internet outlet (Yahoo, CNN, etc.), and writing a Precis for that article. This will be good practice for the students.

C. Have clear outcomes or goals

Make sure that your instructions lead the students to a product. A good session allows students to walk away with something they have produced. Whether it be a list of tasks to do at home, or a paragraph they wrote, or a writing that was edited, students want

to finish the session with something tangible accomplished. Make these goals known in workshop instructions.

Example: Students received drafts back today from me. Have them swap drafts with a peer and make comments on each other's papers. The comments should address three questions:

- 1. What is the author's thesis/purpose?*
- 2. Does the author accomplish their purpose?*
- 3. What are two things that the author does well?*
- 4. What are two things the author can improve?*

After reading and commenting on drafts, help students write a to-do list for their draft. What steps do they need to take to revise and polish this draft? Students should bring these lists to class next session.

D. Allow for collaboration

While our tutors are English experts in many respects, tailor your assignments so that students can collaborate with each other. Rather than using the expertise of the tutor as a resource for each student (i.e. - having the tutor spend 15 minutes responding to each student's paper), utilize the peer-review process of the group. This is often the most difficult piece of writing WC assignments, but good collaboration creates for much more meaningful writing and learning.

Example: Students are coming up with topics for their persuasive papers today. Have students list out three possible topics they might want to write about, then share around. Facilitate a discussion between the students of which topics seem the most interesting and pursuable. The goal is to have students settle on a topic during the session. After each student has chosen a topic, have students write three claims that would support each of their peer's topics (6 claims total). Have students discuss these claims, and address counter-claims that may serve to work in the essay.