

CONSTRUCTING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The writing assignment is the beginning point for assessing students' writing, because the writing assignment is the professor's explanation of what students are required to write to meet the evaluator's/professor's expectations. "Lackluster assignment construction contributes greatly to students' difficulties in completing assignments to their own satisfaction and that of their professors. Assignment construction also affects grading ease and reliability" (Hobson, 1998, p. 52). The problem most professors face in constructing writing assignments is that professors have not been taught how to evaluate such assignments and thus do not have a clear idea of how to satisfy guidelines for creating effective writing assignments. So what are the guidelines for evaluating writing assignments? I suggest three. First, determine purpose and audience. Second, determine what is essential and what is optional. Third, determine what standards will be used to evaluate students' written response to the assignment.

Determining Purpose and Audience

The two pillars of writing—whether teaching it or actually writing—are purpose and audience. What is the purpose for a particular assignment? Who is (are) the audience(s)?

Purpose

By purpose, I do not mean the administrative purpose of providing an opportunity for grading. If the primary purpose for writing assignments is the grading of the writing generated by an assignment, then administrative purposes have superseded educational purposes. Rather, the primary purpose for any writing assignment is to provide students with the opportunity to practice their writing skills so as to further develop those skills. Grading the "final" product of those skills may or may not motivate students to continue writing and may or may not give students satisfactory responses to their writing. Quite frankly, a grade can be ambiguous and of little value in promoting effective writing. So the educative purpose should be the focal point when we talk about the purpose of a writing assignment.

One way to think about the purposes of a writing assignment is to identify two phases of writing: writing to learn and writing to inform. When students write to learn, they explore topics through writing to find out what to say about a topic. Students write so that they can learn. When students have

Speck, B. W. (2000). *Grading Students' Classroom Writing: Issues and Strategies*. ASHF-ERIC Higher Education Report (Vol. 27, No. 3). Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

informed themselves about a topic by writing about the topic, they can write to inform others about the topic. In an extended writing assignment, writing to learn logically precedes writing to inform. Thus, students engage in a variety of drafts to explore or learn about a topic and then, at some point in the drafting process, take what they have learned and frame it for their audience. But the extended writing assignment is not the only way to use writing to learn and to inform. The professor can use writing to find out what students know or have learned at a particular point. A professor could ask students during class to summarize an idea from an assigned reading to determine whether the class as a whole can articulate the idea. Students can be grouped into threes and asked to write one summary. Then each group can read aloud its summary to the class. The professor can then determine whether the class as a whole understood the idea. (The professor does not have to collect, read, or grade the writing students do to summarize the idea. In fact, professors do not have the obligation to read, comment on, and grade all the writing students do for a class. Some writing assignments merely have the function of helping students think aloud or demonstrating their level of understanding about a particular idea.)

Given this overview of writing to learn and writing to inform, what, then, are the possible purposes of writing assignments? Writing assignments generally have multiple purposes (Walvoord, 1986), including providing students with opportunities to learn and to practice using new forms (e.g., laboratory reports, the research paper in a particular discipline, PowerPoint presentations, a type of poetry such as sonnets, book reviews, and interviews), to build on existing skills (e.g., using the ability to write a succinct one-page request memo to create an executive summary, using the ability to analyze an issue in microeconomics to then analyze an issue in macroeconomics, using the ability to explore tonal relationship in triadic chords to describe relationships in more complex chordal structures), and to experiment (e.g., using new vocabulary, creating longer and more complex sentences, exploring concepts that require higher levels of thinking).

Certainly, a writing assignment could include more than one of those purposes. For instance, an assignment could ask students to practice a new form, such as a memo, and create a succinct message using specific engineering terms.

In most cases, however, the more an assignment asks students to exert themselves in a variety of directions, the more "errors" will be evident. For instance, when students try out new vocabulary, they often use new words in stilted ways, not being familiar with the nuances of the vocabulary. The professor, then, has to decide what the purpose is of asking students to incorporate new words into an assignment. If the reason is to give students practice in using the vocabulary, then, even if students' usage is incorrect, the professor may not want to penalize students for practicing usage. Again, if one of the purposes of the assignment is to help students learn a new form, professors may not want to penalize students for making errors, but rather point out the errors and provide opportunities for students to master the form. Thus, one purpose of writing assignments, at least in the early stages of teaching new information, is to give students opportunities to practice using the new information without the threat of penalties. At the same time, professors can give students the assurance that continual practice using the new information will be evaluated more thoroughly later.

Often, one purpose of a writing assignment is to induct students into disciplinary writing. Commonly, research papers in a particular discipline require a particular format. Although the professor should acknowledge that no format has a corner on the entire research paper market, thus admitting the variability of forms and the lack of absolute standards regarding format, the professor also should note that those who endorse disciplinary standards judge a piece of writing according to those standards. An example is the IMRAD format for scientific articles (Introduction, Methods, Results, And Discussion), which specifies generic headings. A scientific article written in IMRAD format will have the major headings Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. The audience for a paper that follows IMRAD format will expect those generic headings. Headings for other scientific works, however, such as a review article, are content specific. In academic disciplines in the humanities, by contrast, articles may be narratives and may not even have headings.

Another disciplinary difference is format for citations. Just because a discipline requires American Psychological Association (APA) format should not obscure the point that APA format is only one among many, including University of Chicago (which endorses two styles for citations), Modern

Language Association, Associated Press, Government Printing Office, and so on. Students need to recognize that professors from various disciplines may call upon them to use a number of formats. Professors can help students see that any one format is merely a host of bundled conventions instead of an absolute standard of correctness and virtue.

Making standards absolute is dangerous not only because disciplines vary a great deal in what is regarded as appropriate, right, and proper writing, but also because good writing in one discipline is not necessarily good writing in another. Good writing cannot be defined without reference to a particular context. Good writing "is writing that is perceived to be good" (Raymond, 1982, p. 401). In some disciplines, the use of *I* in certain contexts (e.g., a scientific research article) still has not gained wide acceptance, and good writing in those disciplines generally disallows the use of it. In other disciplines, the use of *I* is considered natural and desirable, and good writing requires the personal involvement that the use of *I* suggests. Thus, the purpose of inducting students into disciplinary ethos as it is expressed in writing should be tempered with the recognition that disciplines allow for different expressions of ethos. Grading the prose of a scientific research article using disciplinary standards for the personal essay (even if the personal essay is written by a scientist about a scientific topic and published in a scientific publication) is a bit of nonsense. Yet professors may continue to instruct students never to use *I* in their writing, even their writing of a research paper in the humanities, when, in fact, examples of articles in philosophy, religion, history, and English journals in which authors use *I* to refer to themselves are readily available to dispute an absolutist approach to disciplinary conventions. If one purpose of a writing assignment is to induct students into disciplinary conventions, the professor might find it useful to explain to students that the grading of such conventions would not necessarily extend to other disciplines. Such a reminder could be useful when students ask why Professor A in history graded the same paper differently from Professor B in philosophy.

Audience

The second pillar of writing assignments, audience, is inextricably related to the first pillar, purpose. In most writing situations beyond the classroom, authors want to know who will

be reading a document so that the authors can write the document for that audience. Thus, one of the purposes in writing is to define the audience for a piece of writing. Fulfilling this purpose is extremely difficult because many, many documents have multiple audiences. Consider, for instance, a common document on college and university campuses: the student newspaper. Who is the primary audience for an article in the newspaper? The secondary audience? The tertiary audience?

Suppose that a journalism student writes on assignment an article for the newspaper. Suppose also that the journalism professor given oversight for the newspaper not only gives the student pointers during the writing process but also assigns a grade to the published article. Further suppose that the student editor for the newspaper has a tendency to make editorial changes in articles right before the articles go to press and without consulting with the journalism professor. Add to this layered writing process that includes multiple audiences an even more diverse audience for the school newspaper, including the journalism student's friends, acquaintances, sorority rivals, parents, spouse, and brother; professors from across campus who have taught, are teaching, and will teach the journalism student; staff members; administrators; and anyone else who has access to the newspaper.

Again, assume that an article with the journalism student's byline infuriated a prominent donor, who called the president of the university to express her displeasure. The president, in turn, unleashed the wrath of Achilles on the chair of the Journalism Department. Without tracing all the emotional, political, and personal consequences of one audience member's reading of the article, let's return to the beleaguered student journalist and ask again, Who is the audience for the piece she wrote?

Part of the answer to that question is that the importance of certain members of an audience may emerge after a piece has been launched. This insight, painfully learned at times, not only suggests that identifying and writing to multiple audiences can be extremely difficult but also that professors should impress upon students the need for analysis of the audience during the writing process. Ensuring that all audiences reading a document will be able to interpret the document the way the author intended for it to be interpreted is no easy task and probably impossible the more varied the audience. So analysis of the audience, which requires a deft

touch, is a prime consideration when professors create writing assignments and students create documents in response to those assignments.

Problems associated with multiple audiences also apply to a supposedly simple document: a student's report card for one semester's work. Although not a piece of a student's writing, report cards nevertheless are interesting examples of how to interpret grades, an issue that concerns professors. What do those grades on a report card, in the form of single letters, represent? To the student who receives the grades, they may have one meaning. To the professor who gave a grade, the grade may have a different meaning. (And if the professor could see all the student's grades for a particular semester, the professor might change his or her interpretation of the grade he or she gave.) To the student's parents or spouse, the grades might be interpreted using criteria different from those either the student or the professor used. To university administrators, the grades are interpreted in yet another way, in part because administrators may not have information about the classroom context in which the grades were "earned." To legislators, the grades may be interpreted in political terms relating to credit hours and funding.

Those five letter grades A through E are a set of symbols. Each has no inherent meaning nor any reality in itself. Meanings that are attached to these symbols exist in the minds of faculty, the students, and all those who use them for various purposes.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that a B in a course should have different meanings for the instructor, for the student, for the graduate school admission officer, and for the company recruiter. (Weeks, 1978, p. 164)

Unlike the multiple audiences for grades, the sole audience for many classroom writing assignments, unfortunately, is the professor, generally a representative of a very narrow and select audience. Professors, by academic training and number, represent a small population. How many undergraduate students, once they receive the baccalaureate, will ever write for a professor again? Even if baccalaureate graduates in the world of work happen to write to a professor on occasion, most of the writing they do will probably be directed to other audiences. This issue of other audiences

raises questions about the appropriateness of the professor as sole audience for a piece of classroom writing, and certainly raises issues about the relationship between ways that professors grade classroom writing and the ways other professionals evaluate writing in the world of work. If professionals evaluate writing using a set of criteria different from those professors use, the way writing is evaluated in the academy may not have a strong relationship to the way writing is evaluated outside the academy in the typical workplace (Hairston, 1981). Certainly, possible mismatches between grading in the academy and evaluation in nonacademic settings may be unimportant if the relationship between academic performance and nonacademic performance is negligible. That does not seem to be the case, however, especially in light of the stress employers place on grades as one evaluative point for job candidates and employers' continual grousing against academics for lack of adequate preparation students receive for writing in nonacademic settings (Andrews & Sigband, 1984; Sharplin, Sharplin, & Birdsong, 1986; Stine & Skarzenski, 1979). What can academics do to build bridges between academic and nonacademic writing tasks?

One place to start building such bridges is for academics to specify nonacademic audiences in writing assignments to prepare students for writing to audiences other than just the professor. For instance, a professor might include in a writing assignment the following specification for an audience: "This report will go to your boss, the director of the museum, and the regional manager of museum operations. The director is new to the job and has come from Wall Street, where she was an investment broker. She has an undergraduate degree in art history, but other than an internship in her senior year at college, she has never worked in a museum. She sees her role as revitalizing the relationship between the museum and the community, so she has asked you to write a proposal for creating a Board of Community Representatives. The regional manager, on the other hand, . . ."

Specifying nonacademic audiences, however, is not sufficient. People other than the professor should read and comment on students' writing. In other words, specifying imagined audiences is only one possible answer to the problem of expanding the actual audience for students' writing. Indeed, one objection to imagined audiences for writing as-

signments is that students are put in a double bind. The professor specifies an audience or audiences for a writing assignment, but students' writing will be measured against the professor's concept of the specified audience (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). If the professor is the sole actual audience for the writing, the problem of limiting the audience has not been given enough attention. How, then, can the professor include actual representatives from various audiences?

The easiest way is to involve students' classroom peers in reading and commenting on students' writing (discussed later). Another way to expand representatives of the actual audience is to enlist professionals to evaluate and grade students' writing. The use of external evaluators (Sawyer, 1975) is one example of this approach. Even including more than one professor's reading of students' writing can provide both a wider sense of audience and an opportunity to create a dialogue about evaluation standards (Raymond, 1976).

Determining and Specifying What Is Essential and What Is Optional

The second general issue related to developing effective writing assignments is for the professor to separate the essential from the optional and to specify in writing the requirements of the assignment and the criteria that the professor will use to evaluate and grade students' writing. What is essential and what is optional when students fulfill a writing assignment? Must students follow APA style when writing a research paper? If so, such a requirement must be made explicit in writing at the outset of an assignment. Must students ensure that a paper is no more than 10 pages long? Again, such a requirement must be stated in writing when the writing assignment is introduced.

Why should the professor inscribe the writing assignment, including grading criteria, and distribute it to all students? First, the professor establishes a level playing field. Everyone in the class has access to the same information. Second, the professor can address questions about the writing assignment by referring to the document and encouraging students also to refer to the document to answer their questions. Of course, if the document is ambiguous in any way, the professor can explain that what seems to be ambiguous should be understood as freedom to make decisions (e.g., the paper is due anytime between the Monday before Thanksgiving break

and the Monday after Thanksgiving break) or as an oversight that requires clarification (e.g., "I forgot to give a point value for organization, so here it is."). Third, later, when students are working through the process to complete the assignment, they have access to the document and can refer to it to answer questions that arise. Generally, after the professor introduces a writing assignment and goes over it in class, students cannot think of all the questions they will encounter because they have not gotten deeply enough into the assignment.

After students have had more time to scrutinize the assignment, they generally have questions, and the written writing assignment can provide answers to questions that they might not have foreseen when they first reviewed the document. Fourth, the criteria the professor will use for evaluating and assigning a grade to students' writing are made explicit at the outset of the assignment. Students therefore are given the best opportunity for fulfilling the criteria because they have access to the criteria at the beginning of the assignment. Fifth, the process of committing a writing assignment to paper has a tendency to make professors more responsible for the assignment than if they had simply delivered the assignment orally. Writing has a way of making us responsible in ways that oral communication cannot. This responsibility is intensified when professors make public their written writing assignments, because professors demonstrate their ability to write cogently and precisely.

A word of caution, however, is necessary about the specificity of writing requirements for an assignment. When making explicit requirements, the professor should be able to justify them. Even if the students never ask why the professor is imposing a 10-page limit, the professor should ask himself or herself that question and provide a reasonable answer. I suspect two major reasons for page requirements. One, the professor wants to read only a certain number of pages for each student. This reason has some merit. For instance, a professor may know that it takes him or her about 4.5 minutes on average to read and mark one page of a student's writing for a particular assignment. With 35 students in the class and a limit of 5 pages per student, the professor will spend 787.5 minutes or 13.13 hours evaluating students' writing. Showing the math to students could help explain a page limit.

Conversely, professors may establish a page requirement to ensure that students write enough. Thus, a professor may

insist that students write at least 8 pages, believing that students would not be able to address a topic adequately if they wrote 3- and 4-page papers. The problem with this approach, however, is that students may pad their papers to reach the requirement for number of pages, particularly if the professor does not help students use the writing process by stating due dates on the syllabus for draft one, two, three, and so on, and by providing instruction on how to write effectively for a particular assignment. Nevertheless, specific requirements should be outlined at the beginning of the assignment.

The problem with many specific requirements—number of pages, settings of margins, color of paper, use of passive voice, no use of contractions—is that they appear to be artificial to students, and, indeed, the professor may never have felt a need to justify the requirements, assuming that they were bona fide. Generally, specific requirements, such as 1-inch margins all around, except on the left side, which should be 1.5 inches, are derived from printing and binding requirements that may have no particular merit for students' papers. (In fact, requirements that sensible journal editors impose on scholars' manuscripts are designed to save work for the editor when the manuscript is typeset for publication.) Unless professors are inducting students into disciplinary conventions or expecting students to submit their papers for publication, specific format requirements may be quite arbitrary. If such requirements are arbitrary, what is the purpose of basing any part of the grade on them? Professors may want to consider justifying specific criteria instead of putting themselves in the position of failing to reflect critically on their writing assignment or falling prey to the accusation that bare obedience is the intention behind seemingly unjustified criteria.

Although much of this discussion has focused on format or mechanics, issues related to content also need to be made specific. For instance, a professor makes a major assumption when assigning a book review and does not give detailed instructions about what constitutes the appropriate content for a book review. In the main, students believe that a book review is a plot summary. The professor needs to explain to students that the book review should be organized according to disciplinary conventions for book reviews and should explain those conventions.

Because the bulk of this monograph concerns classroom writing that employs the writing process, the kind of writing for testing students, such as impromptu essay exams, is of less interest here. Professors, however, might want to consider the relationship between the purpose of a writing prompt for an in-class impromptu essay exam and the purpose of writing assignments based on the writing process. In an in-class writing prompt, a professor might ask students to compare and contrast x and y . The purpose of such an assignment is to find out what the students know about x and y and their relationship to each other. In a sense, the professor is asking students to demonstrate that they have acquired certain knowledge. Although students might come up with an interesting insight while writing to a prompt, the purpose of the in-class writing assignment should not be to ask students to explore a topic the same way they would explore a topic during the early stages of the writing process. Rather, the professor expects the students to produce a fairly cohesive piece of prose, not a discursive piece of writing that simply lists facts. (It is important to note that professors who evaluate in-class essays according to the same tenets they would use to evaluate a piece of writing a student creates by following the writing process do an injustice to students. An in-class essay is produced under conditions and time constraints widely different from a piece of writing that evolves through the writing process. To compare the two is to compare a rough draft in the early stages of the writing process with a finished piece of writing that a student has had ample opportunity to refine.) Therefore, professors should not assume that the directions to compare and contrast mean the same thing when used in the prompt for an in-class essay and in a writing assignment based on the writing process. Professors need to explicate in writing what they want students to do when comparing and contrasting x and y in a full-blown writing assignment.

Determining What Standards Will Be Used to Evaluate Students' Written Responses to the Assignment

Students should know at the outset of a writing assignment how their written work will be evaluated during the writing process and graded at the end of the process. This expectation is so reasonable that a professor's failure to comply with it is a bit puzzling. If students don't know how their written

work will be evaluated, how do they know where to put their effort in fulfilling the assignment? Indeed, how do they know what really counts in terms of evaluation? Certainly, quality in writing cannot be reduced to a matrix that does not include professional judgment, which cannot be specified completely. Nonetheless, as much as can be specified should be specified.

One difficulty of specifying criteria is that what is agreed upon by all is often given the most priority. For instance, a category such as grammar, mechanics, and spelling is particularly attractive for grading purposes, because a professor can point out a grammatical error and cite a writing handbook or some other authority to show that the error is not merely a matter of personal taste. The problem with traveling such a path of least resistance is that it obscures the need to analyze writing for other, more significant features, such as organization and content. If a student can fail a paper because he or she is a poor speller, then writing has been reduced to spelling ability, when, in fact, unless a student's spelling is horrendous, most of the time readers will be able to figure out what the student is saying. If spelling is the focal point of assessing writing, the professor would save a great deal of time and trouble by administering a spelling test instead of using writing as a platform for testing spelling ability. The problem with making spelling the focal point of a writing assignment is that the need for communicative effectiveness is minimized (Hirsch & Harrington, 1981), because spelling errors, in general, do not hinder students from communicating effectively. The real problem is social status. We tend to look down on people who misspell; when we catch a spelling error, we show our superior ability as language users. We may quickly forget that spelling English words is not a particularly easy task, in part, because English spelling rules allow for many exceptions. In addition, words that sound alike but are spelled differently can be confused (its and it's), the marking of possession is sometimes shown by an apostrophe (girls') and sometimes by a word's form (their), and so on.

The categorization of possible writing errors is a function of writing handbooks, which can be rather thick and contain lots of rules about *common* errors. The existence of such handbooks suggests that students have ample opportunity to make errors that are so numerous they can be grouped and listed year after year in each new handbook publishers pro-

duce. Professors, therefore, might consider how intractable common errors are and explain to students that when students are able to identify and correct common errors in their writing and in the writing of others, they set themselves apart from a good many people who continue to make common mistakes in their writing.

All this is not to say that grammar, spelling, and mechanics should not "count" in some way, but students should know that the reason such things count is not necessarily because of problems with communicative effectiveness; professors often figure out what a student is saying despite surface errors in the student's writing. The real problem is that such errors often irritate readers, who have become accustomed to high levels of correctness, and such irritation can easily be translated into a hypercriticism that feeds upon itself by looking for even more errors. The result is a hunt for errors that focuses on what is wrong with a student's writing, without much regard for what the student did correctly. When this hunt happens during the grading of classroom writing, grading is reduced to citing "obvious" errors.

The other extreme to a reductionist approach to stating grading criteria in the writing assignment is the abstract approach, which explains criteria in abstract terms: "The paper must have good content and be well organized." If that is the finest level of detail for grading criteria, the professor seems to be asking students to intuitively understand what *good content* and *well organized* mean without any further explanation. What exactly constitutes *good content*? How *well* is a paper organized when it is *well* organized? Figure 1 provides criteria professors can use to evaluate their writing assignments, and the next section of this monograph discusses various assessment procedures that a professor can use to specify criteria for an assignment. Examples of such procedures are included there. The point here is that a useful philosophy of assignment design takes into account the need to give a sufficient level of detail to explain evaluative criteria so that the professor can use those criteria to grade students' writing. In addition, students can use the criteria throughout the writing process to shape their writing.

Critiquing Writing Assignments

Colleagues and students can play an important role in providing feedback about potential lapses in writing assign-

A useful philosophy of assignment design gives a sufficient level of detail to explain evaluative criteria so that the professor can use those criteria to grade students' writing and students can use the criteria to shape their writing.

FIGURE 1

Criteria Professors Can Use to Evaluate Their Writing Assignments

1. Are the purposes of the writing assignment stated clearly? Where in the assignment have you told students:
 - How the assignment fits into the overall purposes of the course?
 - Why this particular writing assignment, rather than another assignment, best meets the purposes you believe are important?
2. Are the audiences for the students' writing specified? Where in the assignment have you told students:
 - Whom they should envision as readers of their writing?
 - What your role as the professor is, both as a member of the audience and the person who will determine whether the students have addressed the appropriate audiences?
 - What level of detail about the specified audiences students need to know to complete the assignment effectively?
3. Has the rhetorical context been stipulated? Where in the writing assignment have you told students about the social-political-economic contexts pertinent to the purpose and audiences for the assignment, such as:
 - Interpersonal relations of supposed or real persons in the assignment,
 - Rules that govern behavior,
 - Unstated but enforced policies,
 - External forces that mandate organizational changes,
 - Ethical ambiguities?
4. Have the requirements for the assignment been stated clearly? Where in the writing assignment have you stated requirements, such as:
 - Due dates for drafts,
 - The minimum number of references that must be cited,
 - Disciplinary conventions that must be followed,
 - Maximum number of pages you will accept for each student's response to the assignment?
5. Have options been addressed? Where in the writing assignment have you told students about the choices they have, such as:
 - Freedom to choose a topic,
 - Selection of a hard-to-read font,
 - Number of pages to produce in response to the assignment,
 - Choice of graphics,
 - Use of headings?

6. Have grading criteria been stated clearly? Where in the writing assignment have you told students:
 - How each component of the assignment will be evaluated?
 - What the point ranges are for letter grades?
 - How grades will be calculated for collaborative writing projects?
7. Have model papers written in response to the writing assignment been provided? Where in the writing assignment have you directed students to examine model papers (e.g., at the reserve desk in the library or on a Web page for the class)?
 8. Has the writing assignment been user tested?
 - Have you asked a colleague or colleagues to review the writing assignment?
 - Have you asked students in the class to read the writing assignment and explain it to you?

ments. As readers, they may be able to see gaps and inconsistencies in a writing that the writer is unable to spot because he or she is too close to the text, too engaged in creating a document to have the critical distance necessary to evaluate the document effectively. Thus, professors should consider showing drafts of their assignments to colleagues and asking for constructive criticism. Although such collegial feedback is undoubtedly often done informally, professors might even consider formalizing the process of collegial feedback by meeting regularly to critique each other's writing assignments and jointly grading one or two papers students produced to fulfill the assignment. When professors work collaboratively to discuss grading practices, they can help establish a dialogue about grading standards that can be extended to their entire department. When colleagues work with each other to ensure that writing assignments are carefully and cogently constructed, not slapped together a day before presenting the assignment to students, they can investigate the logical progression from writing assignment to graded paper.

Students also can provide insight into ways that a writing assignment might be improved before the students begin writing for the assignment, so professors might consider consulting with students about the intelligibility of a writing assignment. To do so, a professor could prepare a draft of an assignment, ask colleagues to review it, make any changes

that seem appropriate, and give the assignment to his or her class for further review. Such a review serves two functions. First, students have an opportunity to read the assignment carefully during class and raise questions about how to interpret the assignment. Second, this intensive investigation of the assignment has the potential to raise questions that can be addressed in a revision of the assignment before the professor formally makes the assignment. The simplest way the professor can get feedback from students is for the professor to take the role of the uninformed participant and ask students to explain the assignment. Thus, the professor can say, "I wasn't in class today, so can you explain the writing assignment I heard about? Is it really true that Speck set a 25-page limit?" By asking students to explain the assignment in detail—and as an uninformed participant intentionally misinterpreting critical aspects of the assignment—the professor puts students in a position to focus on and articulate requirements of the assignment.

Conclusion

Of course, all that has been said about constructing writing assignments requires that professors plan ahead of time to integrate writing assignments with course objectives and determine what weight each assignment will have in relation to the entire course grade. Thus, writing assignments should be seen as a component of the entire course, and the professor should clearly understand course goals and be able to articulate those goals in writing, including inscribing the writing assignment. Without such an understanding, it could be extremely difficult for a professor to create effective writing assignments.

FAIRNESS AND PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

A variety of methods are available for classroom grading of students' writing, but which method should a professor use in grading students' written responses to any particular writing assignment? The answer to that question is not apparent, because conflicting perspectives about reliability, validity, fairness, and professional judgment both complicate the question and create a dichotomy. On the one hand, one group of professionals believe that the outcome of writing, a grade or score, should be justified using rigorous standards of psychometric or statistical analysis. This group of professionals are primarily interested in ensuring that the students' written products are graded according to canons of statistical measurement. On the other hand, another group of professionals question whether statistical measurements have the capability to determine the quality of a piece of writing. These professionals want writing evaluation to include both the process a student uses to write and the product the student creates by using that process. These professionals believe, rightly so, that the process and product are quite complex and depend upon each student's personal abilities, inclinations, and capability for growth at any particular developmental level, so teachers need to render professional judgments that cannot be fit into statistical methods. Some of these professionals believe that teachers' judgments need to be translated into grades; others believe that grades are inimical to the writing process and to learning (Bleich, 1997).

Professionals who at one end of the writing evaluation continuum advocate standardized tests of writing and on the other end advocate teachers' autonomy do not represent everyone on the continuum. Professionals on either end of the continuum need to become involved in a dialogue with each other about grading methods (White, 1995). Nevertheless, the two groups of professionals at either end of the continuum do represent pronounced and conflicting viewpoints about grading students' writing, so any discussion of grading methods needs to be introduced by a discussion of theoretical issues related to reliability, validity, fairness, and professional judgment.

Theoretical Issues Related to Reliability, Validity, Fairness, and Professional Judgment

If a person is a reliable employee, he or she is consistent, comes to work every day, and does the same quality of work