

Editor's Introduction

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We are excited to bring you issue 2.1 of *Prompt*. As we have read submissions to *Prompt* over the last year and worked with the diverse scholars who have written about their writing assignments, we have found ourselves thinking of writing assignments as solutions to complex problems. This way of thinking was somewhat new to us. The language around teaching in the contemporary university tends to focus on goals and outcomes—the results we seek, often in contexts beyond the classroom. We do not always lay out for ourselves a similarly rich articulation of the educational problems and challenges a course or an assignment attempts to both navigate and address, within the teaching environment and, often, within the world of an academic discipline. As we have worked with authors, we have found ourselves pushing them to more fully articulate the problems to which the assignment responds, because in understanding those problems, we can more fully assess and appreciate the ingenuity of the assignment.

What are some of the “problems” to which writing assignments respond? First, it must be said that most assignments do not address a single problem. Rather, the “problem” is more typically a multi-variable equation, with each variable affecting the others. But we have noticed a number of recurring variables in this equation that seem to interest those designing writing assignments across disciplines.

We have found that many faculty are interested in the broad problem of engagement—getting students to care about, invest in, and value the work we do together. Many required courses seek to educate students who would not be in that particular classroom if they had a choice, and even non-required courses taken by majors or graduate students compete with a range of other activities for students' time and energy. We frequently see writing assignments that exist in no small part to get students interested in and excited about the course and its subject.¹

Also common is the need to address some challenge inherent in the curriculum that surrounds the course. For example, a first-year writing course may be expected to meet a long list of curricular needs that could not possibly be met within the space of a single

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term. A chemistry course may be under-united, giving it inadequate time to bring novices toward some new expertise. A course for graduate students in English may enroll both those specializing in the topic of the course and those with different intellectual interests. Writing assignments are often shaped by a desire to address these seemingly irresolvable curricular problems in creative ways.

Related to challenges built into the curriculum are the problematic ideas sometimes built into a disciplinary community's thinking about how teaching works. In this context, we have read about instructors grappling with the limits of their own teaching strategies. These strategies, like the default to filling every class meeting with a lecture, usually feel comfortable to faculty and students, though educational research and experience both reveal their shortcomings. In these composing these assignments, we see faculty responding positively to efforts from centers for teaching and learning as well as writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines programs, which have helped to introduce faculty to new teaching strategies and goals involving writing.² Some writing assignments we see thus aim to introduce new, unfamiliar teaching strategies into a classroom as a way of increasing active learning.

Finally, we also see a range of attempts in writing assignments to address specific disciplinary and content-specific learning challenges. How does one get chemistry majors who may have no background in planetary science to understand and see connections between the principle concepts in astrochemistry? How do we get students to not only understand key concepts in sociology but also to use them to understand the world around them? The answer, our authors suggest, is by asking them to write.

This issue of *Prompt* presents three pairs of essays that each address a shared problem in different ways. These pairings emerged organically out of unsolicited submissions to the journal, and they were developed completely independently of one another. While each assignment is quite unique in its own right, we find the experience of reading them together to be valuable.

Amy Robillard and Jennifer Grouling both consider the challenge of “disciplining” graduate students and introducing them to the values of an academic field. In both cases, they are focused on bringing students into the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Both are keenly interested in making this disciplining an active and interactive process, as well as a subject of intellectual scrutiny. No longer are students merely subject to being disciplined; rather, they are invited by a writing assignment to understand, research, interrogate, and participate in the discipline they are entering (or, in some cases, passing through). We are excited by the depth of thinking each of these assignments exhibits, attempting to give intellectual meaning and rigor to a process that too often is left to play out randomly, leaving graduate students to make their own sense of the array of readings, conversations, and experiences they are having in a disciplinary discourse community.

Lauren Sardi, in sociology, and Olivia Wilkins and Cam Buzard, in chemistry, confront the limits of traditional approaches to teaching in the social sciences and sciences, respectively. They develop writing assignments that are central to learning in the class, something

that remains novel in both fields. This is done first and foremost as a way of pursuing active learning in their courses, moving away from familiar tools like the lecture and the problem set. Each confronts questions about what is required when one asks students to write in locations and disciplines in which they may not have written in the past and how to create a structured assignment that supports that student work. Sardi’s assignment focuses on writing-to-learn in a flipped classroom, while Wilkins and Buzard have designed a multi-part writing assignment that culminates with in-class presentations. Interestingly, both assignments find that one way to achieve disciplinary literacy is by asking students to articulate knowledge in accessible, rather than highly technical, ways.

Finally, Julie Ford and David Gillespie take up a vexing problem in the field of composition—how to teach writing at the sentence level. The scholarship in the field has long been united in rejecting current-traditionalist approaches to writing that imagine correctness at the sentence level to be the primary objective of writing instruction. The days of grammar worksheets in a college writing course are (or, it is widely agreed, should be) past. Focuses on process, rhetoric, and genre have flourished for decades, each leading writers to focus in different ways on the social systems in which writing functions and which it shapes. Many fantastic resources exist to aid instructors in approaches to teaching writing informed by these theories of academic writing. And yet, sentence-level clarity and correctness remain a priority of nearly all academic writers and readers. Students and scholars alike are routinely judged by readers on their abilities to compose clear, correct sentences in academic English. These two authors present two very different approaches to bringing focus on the sentence back into a writing course. The idea that correctness and clarity are the most important thing in a writing classroom is long gone, but the notion that they continue to matter to both writers and readers is taken seriously by the assignments presented by these authors.

We invite you to engage with the everyday problem-solving of the writing assignments in this issue of *Prompt*, which draws our attention to the details of teaching as real intellectual work in the moment, in between the various discursive and disciplinary traditions that define the imagined trajectories, later and elsewhere, of our work with students.

Notes

¹A collaborative project between the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Survey of Student Engagement Efforts has been studying the relationship between writing instruction and student engagement for the past eight years. These efforts have found an indirect association between writing across the curriculum and deep learning constructs, as well as a positive relationship between writing and student self-perception of learning (Anderson et al., 2017). Another study suggesting connections between engagement and college writing assignments can be found in *The Meaningful Writing Project* (Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2017).

²For our readers interested in guidance through this kind of pedagogical reflection and change, we recommend the popular *Engaging Ideas* by John C. Bean (2011).

References

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