

## Designing Inclusive Formal Writing Assignments

By Laurie Fisher

The most recent iteration of the CCCC position statement on Multilingual Learners offers the following in terms of Writing Assignment Design:

“When designing assignments, instructors should avoid topics that require substantial background knowledge that is related to a specific culture or history that is not being covered by the course. Instructors should also be aware that topics such as sexuality, criticism of authority, political beliefs, personal experiences, and religious beliefs may be sensitive for students of different cultural and educational backgrounds. We encourage instructors to provide students with multiple options for successfully completing an assignment, such as by providing multiple prompts or allowing students to write in a variety of genres for completing the assignment. Instructors should provide clearly written assignments so that expectations are not left tacit.”

Specifically, in relation to teacher preparation and assignment creation, the statement suggests:

“Writing instructors should gain experience in reflecting on how writing assignments may tacitly include cultural assumptions or tacitly rely on knowledge of culturally specific information. Writing instructors should also gain experience designing writing assignments with second language students in mind, considering topics that are culturally sensitive to multilingual writers and including directions easily understandable to multiple audiences. Discussions on assignment design might include scaffolding, creating benchmarks within larger projects, and incorporating additional resources such as the writing center. Discussions might also include reflections on students’ negotiations between composing in a home country language (including variations of English) and composing in academic English.”

Using these statements as general guidelines, I explore common limitations of the ways in which instructors create assignments and offer suggestions of ways in which to expand and/or focus assignments to be more inclusive to the MLL population.



**Common issues that limit student engagement:**

- Language that assumes that students are from the U.S. or are familiar with a certain culture;
- Academic terminology that presupposes a familiarity or understanding;
- Reading lists that focus solely on U.S. authors and perspectives;
- Prompts that require students to have some working knowledge of U.S. lifestyles or pop culture or cultural norms;
- Prompts that have the illusion of being open-ended but, in fact, encourage students to write from a U.S. perspective.

**Instructor concerns regarding assignment creation:**

- Lack of expertise in a culture or community
- Concern that the instructor’s lack of knowledge regarding a community will compromise their ability to effectively evaluate the assignment
- Comfort with certain conventional genres; reluctance to expand on these genres

**Considerations to bridge gaps and expand points of focus:**

- Provide readings that reflect or encourage different cultural considerations and points of view
- Use examples—in assignment sheets, discussions, and in-class activities—from diverse cultures
- Provide worksheets that “open up” texts and offer “ways into” the prompt

**Essay Assignment Sheets Breakdown**

**PURPOSE:** In the summary of focus points, **bold** certain key terms to review in class to ensure understanding (see below). Terms that are commonplace in academic discourse communities often need further explanation.

**READINGS:** Choose readings that offer a variety of points of view and cultural concerns.

**BACKGROUND:** Do not assume common knowledge of cultural, social, legal, or political systems.

**TASK:** Provide clear, concise instructions re: structure, length, format, etc.

**PROMPT:** Consider providing multiple prompts, or construct prompts that are open to diverse points of view and backgrounds.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES:** Provide clear objectives re: skill development (format, genre, research, rhetorical skills, etc.)

**STEPS TO TAKE:** Offer a step-by-step map for students to follow.

**KEY TERMS:** On each assignment sheet, include key terms—in bold and/or repeated as a separate list. We go over these terms when introducing the assignment and then I refer back to them throughout the assignment cycle.

**QUESTIONS/POINTS TO CONSIDER:** These questions/points can focus on ways in which to enhance critical inquiry by identifying/assessing the voices within a conversation. Make answering these questions one of the ancillary assignments.

**ANCILLARY ASSIGNMENTS:** List these smaller assignments on the essay assignment sheet so that students see how the smaller tasks play into the larger cycle.

**WRITING CENTER LINKS:** Offer either 1) a link to the college/university's writing center, or provide links to specific documents or videos to assist students.

### **Ancillary assignments**

**Journal entries:** An informal way into each assignment. Consider asking a question that encourages an experiential answer in order to build confidence in the assignment topic.

**Outlines of readings:** Have students outline readings and identify rhetorical strategies. Discuss in class. (Small groups suggested at first.) Then, in the larger class discussion, ask students to identify the power structures, cultural assumptions, etc., at work in each text.

**Application of readings:** Have a class discussion that illustrates ways in which students can apply the subject and/or the strategies of the readings. For example, Solnit's "City of Women." (provide example: "case studies")

## **FOCUS: ASSIGNMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

When teaching college composition courses, there are different lenses and topics through which we explore arguments and develop critical reasoning and writing skills. Some topics or thematic courses lend themselves more easily to a global or international perspective. However, we have also found it's our personal experience as professors—how we've been taught; how we've built our expertise and our teaching materials; even our nationalities—that reflect a specifically more US-centered understanding of the world. As a result, formal assignments unintentionally push students in the direction of a US focus. In our research and practice, we've uncovered some common trends in assignment makeup that often unintentionally presume a US bias and perpetuate a notion of a monolithic US culture. And we've endeavored to expand them—to provide assignments that openly invite global perspectives rather than isolating or excluding an international point of view.

### **SAMPLE 1: FRESHMAN COMPOSITION**

**THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXPLORATION OF A SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT, ITS LIMITING ELEMENTS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR OPENING IT UP TO MORE INCLUSIVE POINTS OF VIEW:**

This is from a freshman composition course with the thematic: LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Writing Project 1: Civil Disobedience

#### COMMON ASSIGNMENT COMPOSITION

**READINGS:** Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Rawls, Lewis Van Dusen, Jr.

**BACKGROUND/TOPIC:** Give a brief history and/or definition of civil disobedience, based on the readings

PROMPTS: US-focused: “In the US,” “In modern American society,” “As a US citizen,” “As someone residing in the US.”

Some common MLL student feedback regarding assignments like this:

1. They felt at a clear disadvantage whenever we talked about a historical issue that occurred in the US.
2. In terms of legal issues, they felt as if they weren’t familiar with our legal system, so they didn’t know how to write about it.
3. When I told them (in class or in conference) that they could write about something in their home country or community, they were scared to do so, as they’ve been conditioned in earlier education to always follow the assignment sheet exactly, and to primarily bring up things they’ve heard discussed in class.

### SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

#### PART I: TOPIC

**Topic:** In this assignment you will develop your own position regarding civil disobedience—instances when individuals break laws based on choices of conscience—as you analyze arguments by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lewis H. Van Dusen, Jr. As you will learn from your reading, King argues in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that citizens have a "moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" (518). Van Dusen, on the contrary, claims in "Civil Disobedience: Destroyer of Democracy" that "[C]ivil disobedience, whatever the ethical rationalization, is still an assault on our democratic society, an affront to our legal order and an attack on our constitutional government" (527). Both of these authors construct a persuasive argument, though they come to different conclusions. As a way of entering the discussion ourselves, we will study their patterns of reasoning and use of support and consider their points of accord and disagreement. Then, you will formulate your own definition of what constitutes civil disobedience, and when and/or why it is justified, using recent examples around one social justice issue for support.

#### **PROBLEM:**

- *While the background provides a clear focus on the definition of civil disobedience and illustrates the competing viewpoints of the two authors, there are no examples of civil disobedience in practice.*

#### PART II: PROMPT

**Writing Task:** Consider the historical significance of Civil Disobedience and then assess the necessity/significance of Civil Disobedience **in the world today**. In a **5-page, thesis-driven essay**, please respond to the following question:

**TO WHAT EXTENT, IF AT ALL, IS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE JUSTIFIED IN ITS CURRENT USE?**

Think of your essay as your own statement on civil disobedience. You should structure your essay around your own reasoning rather than around a discussion of the differences and similarities between King and Van Dusen. You may, however, use these authors' ideas both as support for your arguments and as the basis for counter-arguments.

**PROBLEM:**

- *There's an attempt to expand the focus to a more global emphasis, but it's vague. The students need more pointed guidance regarding what to investigate and analyze.*

**PART III: GUIDING QUESTIONS****Additional Suggestions and Questions to Consider:**

1. Under what circumstances would you condone or condemn acts of civil disobedience? Consider specific examples from past and present (for example, Vietnam-era anti-war protests, protests at World Trade Organization (WTO) conferences, Occupy Wall Street, Edward Snowden document leaks, Ferguson verdict protests, etc.).
2. Are some forms of civil disobedience justified and others not? Why? Consider non-violent protest vs. destruction of private property vs. violence against individuals.
3. Should we always attempt legal action before engaging in acts of civil disobedience?
4. Is civil disobedience an effective means of bringing about social, political, and economic change? To what extent?
5. Does civil disobedience undermine our legal system? In what ways?
6. Should an individual who engages in civil disobedience willingly accept his punishment?

**PROBLEMS:**

- *Question 1: examples are US-centric.*
- *Question 3: attempting legal action might not be possible, or effective, depending upon the type of legal system that's being considered.*
- *Question 5: the use of "our" legal system is limiting—and US-centric.*
- *There is no question that asks about different legal systems.*

**ATTEMPTS AT PROMOTING MORE DIVERSE POINTS OF VIEW:****EXPAND THE READINGS AND EXAMPLES**

I added the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's definition of civil disobedience to the readings because it frames civil disobedience in a more global context:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>

Boston Tea Party  
 Resistance to British Rule in India (Gandhi Salt March)  
 Suffragette movement  
 US Civil Rights movement  
 Resistance to Apartheid in South Africa  
 Student sit-ins against Vietnam War  
 Democracy movement in Myanmar/Burma led by Aung San Suu Kyi (8888)  
 And more...

I have students come up with more recent examples during in-class discussion and exercises, and we compile a list together.

### COMPLEMENTARY ASSIGNMENTS

ANCILLARY WRITING ASSIGNMENT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE ASSIGNMENT CYCLE:

1. What's a recent example of civil disobedience in your home country/community? Who was involved? What was the result?
2. What's the most famous example of civil disobedience in your home country/community? To what extent did it help advance justice? How? Why?

ANCILLARY ASSIGNMENT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SEMESTER (LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE):

Homework assignment:

What's the most important or urgent social justice issue in your hometown, community, or country?

- Who are the stakeholders?
- Whose voices are the loudest?
- Whose voices get shut down?
- What's the relation of law to your social justice issue?

### CONCLUSION

On assignment sheet:

- Include more diverse readings.
- Provide examples on the assignment sheet from places other than the US (if it's not on the assignment sheet, students will probably not feel confident enough to write about it).
- Provide questions/considerations that specifically direct students to investigate other countries and communities.

Additional activities:

- From the beginning of the semester, create in-class activities and homework assignments that are inclusive of MLL students' experiences and knowledge.

### **SAMPLE 2: ADVANCED COMPOSITION**

This assignment is from an Advanced Composition course in the Social Sciences; however, I see this as applicable to a variety of fields.

### Assignment 1: Reading Culture

#### Purpose

This assignment requires you to analyze a cultural “text” using a particular **methodology**. We will be studying the print magazine **genre**, and you will be writing for an educated but non-specialist audience like that of *Harpers*, *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic*. We will also be paying special attention to carefully observing the **conventions** of magazine publications and learning to make stylistic choices that respond to the **rhetorical demands** of the popular print genre.

#### *Considerations:*

*Bolded terms are to be looked up by students and then discussed in class.*

**Learning Objectives** – *These objectives allow students to understand and focus the purpose and audience.*

At the end of this assignment cycle, you will know how to:

- Trace the underlying cultural assumptions regarding a “text,” and call them into question in order to make your own assessments
- Craft an argument focused to an educated, culturally interested, non-academic audience
- Determine which types of evidence are most persuasive for this audience
- Follow the conventions of the magazine essay genre

**Readings:** (all readings are in the A1 folder on Blackboard)

1. Brodesser-Akner, Taffy. “Losing it in the Anti-Dieting Age.” *New York Times Magazine* (August 2, 2017).
2. Solnit, Rebecca. “City of Women.” *The New Yorker* (October 11, 2016).
3. Quammen, David. “The Face of a Spider.” *The Flight of the Iguana* (NY: Touchstone, 1988).
4. Gopnik, Adam. “Bumping Into Mr. Ravioli.” *The New Yorker* (September 30, 2002). 80-84.
5. Barthes, Roland. “The Brain of Einstein.” *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Levers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 68-70.

*I use Solnit to begin the assignment. Solnit offers a way of exploring one’s surroundings that reveals the ideological structure of a cultural object. From here, I ask students to look at their hometowns and decipher the underlying meanings of the ways in which their city or town has been built.*

**Background and Assignment Description:**

Although it is a widely accepted belief that culture, particularly popular culture, shapes our identities and perceptions of the world in many ways, it was not until the 1960s that cultural studies as an academic field emerged. Cultural studies seeks to further understand the identity of a culture and its social/political order through close analysis of cultural "texts" (objects, rituals, practices). The beliefs of cultural studies underwrite this assignment, as it is based on the premise that through close reading, we can begin to understand the **assumptions, values, and codes communicated in cultural texts**. As Roland Barthes writes in his introduction to *Mythologies*, a collection of essays that looks at the objects of French daily life, "The starting points of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality . . . I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there." However, Barthes' approach is one of many; as we will see through the other assigned readings, there are a variety of ways to "read" culture.

After careful consideration of the readings, choose your own "text" to evaluate, and write a thesis-driven 5- to 7-page essay, to answer one of the following prompts: *Here I offer a choice of prompts so that each student can find the one which most clearly aligns with their interests and experience.*

1. **Using "Bumping Into Mr. Ravioli" as a model, provide an in-depth cultural analysis of a text which does not have obvious appeal but is nonetheless celebrated. Explain why people are so attracted to this text and what this attraction suggests about a specific quality of modern life.**
  
2. **Using "City of Women" as a model, consider a cultural practice that people don't necessarily notice in an active way but that, nonetheless, has an underlying impact on how one is taught to view the self, community, or world at large.**
  
3. **Using "The Face of a Spider" as a model, investigate an object/figure and/or action/practice that seems insignificant but, upon closer analysis, can be considered in a larger cultural critique.**
  
4. **Using "The Brain of Einstein" as a model, provide an in-depth cultural analysis of the representation of an iconic object. Explain why your audience finds this object so fascinating and how visual and rhetorical constructions of this object might produce a "euphoric security," perhaps by meeting competing or contrasting needs.**

Your object might be a thing, a person, a theory, a concept, a work of art, or something else, although the more specific your object, the easier the assignment will be. You will obviously want to offer a description of your object but don't get bogged down in listing details; your main focus should be insightful, cogent analysis.



While there is not a minimum source requirement, you must make it clear which critics' methodological model you are using and cite appropriately.

**Steps:**

1. Read (homework) and discuss (in class) the various articles (required readings listed above) to establish the different methodologies used to explore various objects or cultural practices (the "text")
2. Choose an original "text" (object, practice) you plan to assess in your essay and the methodology through which you plan to explore the text; do research regarding the history and practice; gather data
3. Investigate the ways in which your methodology helps you assess the text
4. As you draft your essay, look to the specific audience (culturally interested, educated, non-academic) in order to determine which evidence/examples would best persuade your readers
5. When revising your essay, pay special attention to audience engagement (to whom are you writing?), clarity of purpose (why are you writing the essay?), and personal engagement (why are you interested in this text?)
6. Make sure to check sentence-level issues: edit for force and clarity; use spellcheck; proofread carefully throughout the essay
7. Follow format listed on the syllabus
8. Upload the final draft of your essay to Blackboard

*This is an important, recent addition to my assignments. Each formal assignment cycle contains many steps. By putting them on the assignment sheet, students are reminded of how each step fits into the whole. They can also use this as a checklist to make sure they engage with each step. For the MLL population, I have found this particularly helpful, as the steps help them to see where they're going and how they'll get there.*

**Grading:**

Please see the rubric in Blackboard content section.

**Additional notes:**

- Remember that you are writing for a magazine read by people who are educated and culturally literate, which means that this essay will differ dramatically in style and tone from previous academic papers. People read magazines by choice, so you need to be engaging and entertaining.
- This is a thesis-driven essay. However, because non-academic writing doesn't usually begin with a thesis, there is some leeway in respect to where the thesis will go. We'll talk more about this in class.
- While you can choose what to write about, I would encourage you to stay away from topics having to do at all with social media, selfies, music festivals, or reality television unless you genuinely feel that you have something really original to say. Otherwise,

these are topics that have been hashed out to death. The best essays generally look at texts that aren't obvious choices.

- Give yourself ample time to pick a topic. First, you need to make sure that the methodology you employ works with your text. Second, you will have a much better time working on the paper if you are actually interested in the object.

From our group MLL-committee sessions:

Recommendations for best practices for designing MLL-friendly assignment sheets/prompts:

1. Gather your colleagues to **discuss the challenges associated with designing prompts** that are inclusive and mindful of the needs of MLLs.
2. **Workshop prompts** in small groups. Discuss whether a wholesale revision is needed or if the prompt needs to be edited for word choice.
3. In aiming to curate reading lists that offer a variety of perspectives, **create a bank of readings**. Ask faculty to submit texts they've taught and websites from which they've culled reading materials that offer non-U.S. perspectives on the topic areas most covered in the composition classes at your institution.
4. **Talk with MLLs** from semester to semester to gauge their own interests and expertise in the topics that most interest them. Use this information when designing prompts and looking for readings.

When introducing a prompt, **use language that encourages students to choose topics they feel comfortable with**. For instance, when sharing examples of past essays written by students, make sure to touch on a diversity of approaches and topics.