



Literacy at Hartford Public High School

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Designing an Essay Question

Assignment design influences students' thinking and writing processes. When planning assignments, consider not only the course learning goals but also the processes you want to invoke.

When you assign writing to your students, keep several important points in mind.

1. Make sure that the assignment is complete and understandable to all the students in the class. Take nothing for granted. Make sure that they students know, preferably on a handout, what you expect in terms of a deadline for handing it in, the format of the piece, the length of the piece, what you expect in the way of support for key points, and the way that you will correct the piece.
2. Make sure that your assignment is not overly complex. We teach high school courses, not college-level courses. Make sure that the "question" that you are asking the students to respond to is clear and obvious. Do not "hide" the question among numerous distracting details. Make sure, also, that the structure of the response that you expect from the students is not overly detailed or complicated. Providing the students with a template for them to follow is always a good idea. This template will show what you expect in each section of the essay. Shaping the template in for form of a checklist on which students can check off each part as they complete it can only help lower-ability students succeed.
3. Focused questions are much easier for students to handle than are vague imperatives such as *analyze* or *discuss*.

Compare the following questions:

1. In the graveyard scene of Hamlet, Shakespeare alters his sources by adding the clownish gravediggers. How does the presence of the gravediggers influence your interpretation of the scene? Do you think they are funny? Absurd? Blasphemous? How does Hamlet's attitude toward the gravediggers affect the scene? Do you think it is appropriate to sing while digging a grave? What about the jokes they tell? Do you think that Yorick was more like the gravediggers or more like Hamlet? Do you think it is appropriate

to have a lighthearted moment like this in the middle of a tragedy? Is the scene really lighthearted?

2. In the graveyard scene of Hamlet, Shakespeare alters his sources by adding the clownish gravediggers. How does the presence of the gravediggers influence your interpretation of the scene?

Which question would you, as a teacher / student, prefer to respond to? Why? Remember: keep it simple and focused.

Consider the following examples:

1. Pick one of the following and write an essay about it: (a) Gothic cathedrals; (b) Charlemagne; (c) the Black Death.
2. "There is a connection between the worldview of a culture and the kind of architecture it produces." To what extent does this quotation explain the differences between Romanesque and Gothic churches?

The first question is too broad and too unfocused. It offers the students no guidance. The second is tighter, asking students to apply their knowledge to a specific context.

Again, consider the following examples:

1. Discuss the use of pesticides in controlling mosquitoes.
2. What are the pros and cons of using pesticides to control mosquitoes? OR Which pesticides (if any) would you recommend using to control pesticides in the attached case, and why?

The word *discuss* in the first question often poses problems for many students, who are unsure what to do. The second question(s) is much more specific, again asking students to apply what they have learned to a specific situation.

The following suggestions are important when designing an essay questions.

1. Know what you want students to learn AND do. Don't be unclear; be specific.
2. Require students to support a position. This means using information that is specific and appropriate. The information could come from the text book or from some other source that you designate.
3. Break the assignment into clear steps. Using a checklist to guide students is always a good idea. As the students complete one of the steps, they check it off before proceeding to the next step. This

guarantees that students will complete all that you expect.