PART V

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UNDERGRADUATE ASSIGNMENTS AND ESSAY EXAMS

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Introduction and definitions
In our recent research into writing in over 35 departments at 12 universities, we have found that between 77 and 100 per cent of undergraduate courses at universities require some kind of writing assignment, and virtually every course requires an assignment, a written exam, or both. Across every field of study, students write assignments and exams for a host of reasons: to demonstrate their knowledge, synthesize ideas, or present new research. What gets written has changed across time and cultures, and today both L1 and L2 students face a wide variety of writing assignments as they move from one discipline of study to the next. As writing in one form or another has become more central to the contemporary academic experience, research on writing assignments has attracted more and more attention. To understand some of the motivations behind this surge of research, we begin with a history of writing assignments in university. We then highlight the critical issues affecting writing assignments and showcase recent developments in writing pedagogy.

Historical and cultural perspectives
Writing assignments have developed differently in different countries, based on a variety of factors, including academic cultures, student needs at different times, and purposes for higher education. The majority of assignments have roots in the classical Greek and Roman traditions that influenced eighteenth-century rhetorics; such rhetorics continued to dominate post-secondary education in the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Connors, 1997). Assignments in many undergraduate courses began within a tradition of oral rhetorical performance but gradually gave way to written assignments including literary analyses, personal experience papers, and term papers (Brereton, 1995). In the writing courses that flourished in the US between 1870 and 1900, the modes of discourse approach—an approach requiring students to write persuasive, narrative, descriptive, or argumentative essays—came to dominate the curriculum (Connors, 1997). However, this dominance was soon challenged by the German tradition that was imported along with the German model of research university at this time (Brereton, 1995).
In Germany, the “Hausarbeit” has been and continues to be the main genre of writing assignment required by students in disciplinary courses (Macgilchrist & Girgensohn, 2011). Students produce a major research paper, often developed over the semester but always completed over the post-semester break, that makes up the bulk of a student’s grade for the course. This approach rests on an expectation that students’ independent research and writing is the best reflection of their learning in the course. It also expects that students will arrive at university already in possession of the writing skills necessary to succeed in university—or that they will acquire these skills independently.

Russell (2002) describes the development of the term paper in the US context as an offshoot of the adoption of the German model of the university in the 1870s. While originally similar to the “Hausarbeit,” in the 1870–1910 period the term paper devolved into an arhetorical, easily plagiarized evaluation instrument. In the twentieth century, this genre gradually became a storehouse for knowledge and was therefore content-focused, a kind of knowledge display, rather than an intellectual investigation motivated by a real question or problem the student was attempting to solve. The popularity of term papers led to companies creating inventories of 16,000 term papers for students to purchase—demonstrating that the term paper assignment was clearly a widespread assignment (Russell, 2002).

About the time the German model was adopted in the 1870s, Harvard instituted a first-year writing course, often referred to as freshman composition in US contexts. The genres of writing assignments in upper-division courses (where the term paper dominated) and composition courses have remained distinct from the genres in other disciplines at post-secondary institutions with different mandates. Studies of assignments at teachers colleges in the early twentieth century, for example, reveal a move away from the term paper and towards assignments including editorials, magazine articles, and book reviews (Gold, 2008). Project themes in these schools rejected the term paper research perspective in favour of an active, problem-solution proposal argument genre that connected students with important public concerns (Gold, 2008). Studies of writing assignments in US women’s colleges in the early and mid-twentieth century reveal that the assignments given there created a social, critical, and publicly-oriented literacy (Gold & Hobbs, 2013).

However, this is a US tradition. The three kinds of courses—first-year composition courses, research (or term) paper courses, and writing-in-the-disciplines courses—that evolved in the latter part of the twentieth century in the US do not exist outside that culture. Most often students encounter assignments in course subjects and are helped in a learning centre (Deane & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2012). In British Commonwealth countries, for example, writing instruction and assignments have evolved quite differently. Since the early 1990s in the UK, there has been a movement away from the current-traditional approach to writing instruction (the modes of discourse) toward academic literacies (ways of knowing and participating) and writing-in-the-disciplines (genre features and social action) approaches (Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Lillis, 2006). In one engineering course that does have a writing component, for example, the academic literacies approach results in assignments that must respond to audiences and rhetorical imperatives (Ahearn, 2006). In the 1990s in Australia, the practice of “embedding” writing instruction in disciplinary courses emerged to lead students to write a broad range of writing assignments (Skillen, 2006). Instructors offer help in the form of workshops and consultations from learning centres, and some credit courses in academic departments are available (Purser, 2012). The assignments, though, come from the academic courses students enrol in across the disciplines.
Despite its close physical connection to the US, Canada did not adopt the first-year composition course widely. In Canada, the rapid expansion of the university system occurred somewhat earlier than in the UK and Australia, in the 1960s. French-Canadian universities offered the classical college curriculum similar to the nineteenth-century US curriculum—which emphasized belles lettres and rhetoric—into the 1960s, when the rapid expansion of the higher education system and cultural changes in Quebec led eventually to vastly different programs of instruction there (Graves, 1994). The assignments found in Quebec universities in the 1960s were similar to those offered in the US in the nineteenth century as part of the classical curriculum, which focused on literary critiques and spoken orations (Connors, 1997). The Anglo-Canadian traditions, in contrast, moved away from the classical curriculum at the start of the twentieth century and towards assignments that required students to analyze literature. That tradition of assignments dominated the teaching of writing throughout much of the twentieth century (Johnson, 1991; Hubert, 1994). In English Canada, the rapid expansion of enrolments from the 1960s onward led to writing courses offered outside of English departments; technical and professional writing programs; and writing-in-the-disciplines programs (1970s onward) that focused on writing done in content area courses (Schryer & Steven, 1994; Smith, 2006). These courses often require a set of assignment genres specific to technical and professional writing (proposals, manuals, reports) or to a discipline or profession.

### Critical issues and topics

University writing assignments vary tremendously across the academic disciplines, requiring cognitive tasks from basic summary to analysis and synthesis of conceptual material to development of original ideas. Key issues in university writing assignments include the connection between critical thinking and writing; the variability of assignments across disciplines; the extent of the need for direct instruction on the part of instructors about the genres of writing they ask students to produce; the contrast between workplace and academic genres of assignments; the changing nature of assignments as instructors incorporate more digital and multimodal practices into their requirements; methods for providing productive feedback on writing; the specific challenges writing assignments present for multilingual writers; and written exams. Undergraduate assignments vary principally across two continuums: those assigned in courses across the curriculum, and those assigned in writing-focused courses.

Research measuring how much time students spend on coursework and their interest in the material has shown that students are most engaged in writing assignments that require “meaning-making” (Anderson, Paine and Gonyea, 2009; Bean & Weimer, 2011). Such assignments move beyond summary of material and ask students to develop deep analysis, conduct original research, or apply course concepts to new situations. In other words, these assignments clearly connect critical thinking and writing, rather than seeing writing as the act of communicating already-existing facts. A key factor in meaning-making assignments is “transfer” (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Counsell, 2011; Nowacek, 2011; Wardle, 2007, 2009). With a focus on transfer, instructors assign writing that teaches skills and knowledge that their students will be able to adapt and apply to other situations. For example, Wardle’s (2009) argument that introductory academic writing classes should be focused on “writing about writing” emphasizes helping students think critically about what kinds of genres may be required of them in their later classes. Such an approach, she argues, leads to students being better able to adapt to the many different writing tasks required of
them in the academic disciplines they will encounter during their undergraduate careers. In courses beyond first-year writing, writing assignments that emphasize transfer can help students understand how genres in one course can be adapted or used in later academic, workplace, or personal situations. Researchers on transfer have used interviews, text-based interviews, focus groups, composing-aloud protocols, and classroom observations to analyze how students experience transfer of writing knowledge from first-year or other writing courses to academic, workplace, and community contexts (Moore, 2012). Researchers also analyze student texts to understand how writing skills shift in different contexts (Moore, 2012). Findings from transfer research indicate that students struggle to make use of their antecedent genre knowledge when asked to write in new genres (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). These findings suggest that direct instruction about new genres, as well as coaching students to directly adapt their antecedent genre knowledge, is productive for students writing university assignments.

The concept of transfer has been critiqued, however, especially in contexts where students do not take first-year composition courses. In Canada, for example, where most students do not take a writing course at all, students instead must gain what knowledge they have of writing from their high school and content courses. Brent (2012) argues that transfer is the wrong term in such cases; instead, he suggests that students must transform the knowledge of writing they obtain from assignments and re-shape it to fit the new contexts they encounter. He posits that students’ rhetorical knowledge most likely comes from the broad experience of attending university and from learning “to serve multiple rhetorical masters in reasonable ways” (p.589). While students transfer some specific skills from a writing course to their workplace contexts, they show a greater ability to transform what they had learned into a general disposition to make rhetorical judgments. Brent concludes that this general disposition to transform knowledge is the result of many repeated interactions with concepts and practices over an extended period.

Writing assignments in disciplinary courses must resonate or connect with writing assignments in first-year composition courses for students to connect these experiences in meaningful ways. Yet the variability of assignments across disciplines presents challenges for students. For example, while many introductory writing classes require students to write a research paper, it is well known that each discipline has its own conventions and requirements for research papers. Therefore, it is not possible to prepare students for all of the genres they will encounter in their university writing assignments. Indeed, a critical issue in writing assignment scholarship is the tensions between writing-specific courses, writing across the curriculum (WAC), and integration or writing in the disciplines.

While it is necessary for instructors in different disciplines to provide direct instruction about the genres of writing they ask students to produce, it is by designing writing assignments that ask students to make meaning out of material they are learning that instructors can engage students deeply in course content, while also teaching them the conventions and epistemologies of a particular discipline (Soliday, 2011). Soliday’s study of the genres of academic writing focused on two aspects of writing assignments that students must respond to: stance, which was reinforced by teacher talk in class and readings; and the contextualization of what is being studied with the overall focus of the course. A key component of this work is the partnership between the writing fellows (graduate or senior undergraduate students who assist the main course instructor) and the course instructors who, between them, negotiate meaningful writing assignments.

In order to accomplish their goals, writing assignments can have built-in processes or sequences that model for students what effective writing processes look like. For example,
students might be required to submit sections or complete drafts of a major paper before the due date in order to receive feedback from their instructor (and often their classmates) before turning in the final draft. As White (2006) puts it, “the most effective writing assignments set up a continuum of drafting and revising that begins when the assignment is distributed and concludes at the end of the term—if then” (p.2). The final assignment for a writing course might be a “portfolio” that contains students’ drafts of assignments along with revised versions of what the student deems is their best work, an approach that allows students to show how their writing has developed over the semester, and that allows instructors to grade students on the process of writing, not simply the product. Assignments can also be scaffolded in order to teach and then build on new skills. For example, German instructors in content areas who require a Hausarbeit from students after the end of the semester may require and provide feedback on writing assignments throughout the semester in order to build up to the final project. Annotated bibliographies, research proposals, or portions of the Hausarbeit, such as an introduction or a literature review, break down the major task of a research project into smaller steps while also teaching necessary research and writing skills.

To further emphasize the meaning-making of assignments, as well as to develop the transferability of writing skills, writing studies scholars have begun to critique the separation between workplace and academic genres of assignments (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Dias et al., 1999). Their questions have led to writing assignments that emphasize workplace writing (Garay & Bernhardt, 1998), teach technical writing (Poe et al., 2010), or move writing assignments beyond the classroom into the public (Wells, 1996). In many cases, these three purposes are interwoven (Bourelle, 2012; Kiefer & Leff, 2008; Miller, 2014). For example, in a biology class, students might create a technical report for a local community group instead of writing a traditional lab report; or they might write or revise a contribution to Wikipedia for a class assignment, shifting the audience for their writing beyond the instructor and their classmates. The move toward public writing is also linked to the move from textual to multimodal and digital writing assignments. Digital communication has led to writing’s visual nature being more emphasized in communication pieces, as well as leading to new developments in digital and multimodal writing. For that reason, many argue that it is necessary to make writing assignments more digital and visual (George, 2002; Selfe, 2007; Wysocki et al., 2004). This emphasis has led to writing assignments that include videos, pamphlets, websites or web writing, and more.

No matter what the design or learning goal of a writing assignment, a critical component of writing assignments is assessment—both during the writing process and at the end. In the US, the current-traditional rhetoric movement of the late nineteenth century led to an emphasis on assessing grammar, sentence-level editing, and even handwriting (Berlin, 1984). Furthermore, when it comes to teaching English as an additional language (EAL), grammar and sentence-level editing are still regarded as essential to instruction (Chanock, D’Cruz & Bisset, 2009). Yet, when the focus is not on EAL, researchers argue that too much emphasis on “sentence-level,” “local,” or “lower-order concerns” distracts from the teaching of “global” or “higher-order concerns” (Bean & Weimer, 2011). Instead, writing studies scholars argue, instructors should focus on giving feedback that engages students in the critical-thinking aspects of an assignment (Bean & Weimer, 2011) by responding to students as co-participants in an academic endeavor (Sommers, 2006).

At the same time, multilingual writers continue to face specific challenges in writing assignments. Students for whom English is a second, third, or fourth language might struggle with grammar, with organization, with style, or with citation styles. While many
native English speakers certainly will struggle with the same concerns, multilingual writers are more likely to have cultural or lingual backgrounds that increase their challenges. For that reason, scaffolding assignments, providing direct instruction on genres, and providing feedback that addresses both global and local concerns are essential components of writing assignments for multilingual writers.

Written exams

Written exams have been criticized in writing studies scholarship because they violate, or appear to violate, findings from writing process research: that students need to prewrite, draft, and revise their work. Indeed, writing instructors are often “suspicious” of such an assessment device (White, 2006, p.25). As Bizzell and Singleton (1988) put it, “the problem with essay exams is that they ask students to produce text under the worst possible conditions” (p.177). However, research shows that, even in essay exams, students do follow these steps of the writing process (Worden, 2009). At the same time, essay exams can put multilingual writers at a distinct disadvantage due to time constraints, which allow little time for sentence-level editing.

When the choice is between multiple-choice exams and essay exams, essay exams have many benefits (Sundberg, 2006; White, 2006). Further, essay exams challenge students to write about course material in an on-the-spot and succinct manner. Bizzell and Singleton (1988) argue that writing responses to short essay exams is like answering questions after a lecture—it challenges students to consider perspectives or connections they haven’t before and to formulate answers quickly that draw on their knowledge in new ways. Indeed, well-designed essay tests allow students to demonstrate deeper knowledge than multiple-choice tests, and to do so in a way that demonstrates their writing abilities and process. Essay tests also offer pragmatic advantages: they can be graded more quickly than longer essays, and the risk of academic dishonesty is nearly entirely mitigated (White, 2006).

Research on outcomes of written exams shows mixed results, but is conclusive in determining that integrating and embedding exam activities into the course itself is crucial in helping students learn to write this genre. Well-designed and clear essay questions are crucial to students’ having the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge accurately. In order to design clear essay tests, White (2006) recommends using clear directions and terms (pp.28–30), discussing the exam instructions in class (p.29), ensuring that the instructor has a clear sense of what kind of response she or he is looking for (p.30), teaching students to dissect exam instructions (p.30), and teaching students to write in the kinds of modes (e.g. personal vs. expository) that they will be asked to write in for an exam (pp.30–31). Practice is indeed essential to students’ success with essay exams. Practicing short essay questions and participating in mock exams can not only help students better understand material they will be tested on (Dotson, Sheldon & Sherman, 2010), but also, we argue, familiarize students with genre expectations and constraints.

Current contributions, research, and practice worldwide

Research on writing assignments identifies the genres and tasks undergraduates write across the academic disciplines (Applebee, 1984; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010; Melzer, 2014; Paltridge, 2002). This research provides practitioners with a rich picture of what kinds of writing assignments are commonly used and what makes these effective. Most of these
studies begin with surveys and the collection of course syllabi documents to identify the kinds of assignments required by instructors, but recent work also integrates interviews with instructors and sometimes with students (Tardy, 2009; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006).

Until recently, much work about the nature of academic writing assignments relied on local, very specific sets of data around assignment genres. Tardy (2009), for example, in her study of genre and second language learners, notes the importance of the task or assignment and how it affects student writers. Assignments that require students to engage outside of the classroom provide the kind of opportunities needed to build genre awareness and disciplinary identity. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) demonstrate that, while there may exist dominant genres in academia, there are often alternative or emerging genres also present. They identify three characteristics of academic writing: evidence that students have studied the subject of the assignment in detail; a focus on reason over emotion in the written document students produce; and a reader who is logical, reading for content, and reading to respond to the document students write. This kind of writing, then, is distinct from alternatives to academic writing which are characterized by alternative formats, alternative organization, non-standard syntax and dialect, non-standard methodologies, and new media (p. 12). Thaiss and Zawacki point out that disciplines and genres are not stable and homogenous; instead, they can be characterized as fluid and responsive to social change. The tendency to identify genres with academic departments can be misleading, since the departments may well be administrative conveniences rather than coherent knowledge areas. The most pertinent conclusion from this study of assignment genres is the elasticity, ambiguity, or tension apparent in any attempt to characterize genres of academic writing.

Tardy and Thaiss and Zawacki rely on a limited set of interviews and qualitative data to arrive at their conclusions. A new trend, however, is emerging that seeks to use larger data sets to answer questions about writing in disciplinary contexts. Some of the most extensive, large-data information available about the writing tasks students encounter in university has come from Melzer’s (2003, 2009, 2014) studies of writing assignments. Melzer’s (2003) work focuses on WAC approaches, identifying courses that have a WAC focus, and using Britton et al.’s (1975) taxonomy of purposes or functions for writing (that is, expressive, poetic, and transactional). For Britton, expressive writing is for the self and is informal; poetic writing is imaginative and focused on the text; transactional writing is focused on the audience and attempts to persuade or inform. Melzer’s assignments draw from 787 syllabi available online at 48 different institutions in the US. He categorizes the assignments he finds according to three broad criteria: aims/purpose (following Britton’s categories), audiences (teacher, self, peers, broader), and genres. He finds that the vast majority of assignments can be categorized for function or purpose as “informative” (73 per cent), with exploratory (15 per cent) and persuasive (11 per cent) as the other significant purposes. The audience for student writing is the instructor 83 per cent of the time. The most popular genres are short-answer exams (23 per cent), journals (13 per cent), and term papers (6 per cent).

In his follow-ups to this study, Melzer (2009, 2014) expands his sample to 2,101 assignments from 400 courses equally sampled from natural and applied sciences, social sciences, business, and arts and humanities. His goals are similar: to identify the purpose, audiences, and genres of these assignments. Additionally, he examines variations between institutions, levels of courses, and WAC connections. He finds that “writing to inform” dominates all other purposes for writing (66 per cent); students overwhelmingly write for instructors as the audience (82 per cent); and, although instructors require students to write in a truly extensive list of genres, the term paper and the short-answer essay exam are most common. Melzer concludes that disciplinary courses would benefit from more
expressive and exploratory writing, as is common in composition courses. He also finds that the research paper assignment often fits well with Thaiss and Zawacki’s “alternative assignments” because it possesses elements of creativity and exploration (p.46). Ultimately, he argues, WAC courses that set out to teach writing explicitly in the context of a discipline provide the best insights for students writing in that discipline, and they provide more opportunities for drafting, revising, and peer response (p.91).

In a similar vein, a Canadian research group (Graves, forthcoming) recently gathered and analyzed over 5,000 assignments from 36 curricular units at 12 universities in Canada. In contrast to Melzer’s data (which were gathered from websites across the US), these assignments were complete data sets from curricular units in the department or faculty/college that housed the academic program. The goal of this work was local—to encourage departments to reflect on the genres of writing they require in their courses, and to consider how they might make those writing activities better. Such research responds to the call from Anson and Dannels (2009) to create program profiles of departments in an effort to map the writing demands of undergraduates onto the curriculums that they encounter. In an early study, Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010) collected a complete sample of syllabi from a small liberal arts college. This study examined 179 syllabi and 485 assignments; unlike Melzer (2003, 2009, 2014), it did not include exam writing. Of the assignments, 31 per cent were classified by instructors as “essays” or “papers”. The group also categorized the assignments into genres and identified 63 per cent of assignments as “essays/papers”. This study found that instructors were idiosyncratic in the labels they used to identify the genre of document they wanted students to write. In addition, students wrote more at the second and third year levels than they did at the first and fourth year levels. Perhaps most interesting was the length of assignments: more than half of all assignments were four pages or shorter. The study also found that 44 per cent of all assignments were related to another assignment through nesting or connecting. For example, a proposal for an essay would be related to the essay itself; 70 per cent of assignments contained no reference to how they would be graded, and 86 per cent of assignments made no reference to any kind of feedback before grading.

The study has since been extended to 11 additional universities and to over 36 departments from across the curriculum (Graves, forthcoming). Results from this 5,000-assignment study show that 79 per cent of syllabi do not mention any kind of revision or feedback, and 78 per cent do not provide grading criteria for assignments. Genres are clustered around certain areas of study: nursing, for example, has a relatively small number of genres (13 over four years), and four of these genres require reflection as a primary purpose or aim. In engineering, students write an average of almost three written assignments per course (excluding exams), and the majority of these assignments do not require the advanced cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis, or evaluation (Parker, Marcynuk & Graves, 2014, p.3). This finding, among others, will almost certainly lead to curricular revision to ensure that higher order skills appear more frequently. Another finding, that engineering assignments are dominated by variants of the report with proposals a related genre, while unsurprising, helps focus the purpose and genre for engineering writing instruction. While “papers” and “essays” dominate assignments in the arts, in the social sciences these genres compete with presentations, lab reports, and proposals. Science disciplines are dominated by the lab report, with papers or essays as the next most prevalent genre. These are complemented by the presentation genres: posters, presentations, and critiques. In pharmacy, professional genres such as the care plan, consultation, and medical reconciliation join the list of dominant genres. In physical education and recreation, presentations become the dominant
genre in part because students are required to be able to demonstrate various techniques associated with sports and exercise. Ultimately, this study finds that assignments are very much related to the activities and purposes of the field of study.

**Recommendations for practice**

In every genre of writing assignment, best practices for designing effective writing assignments include assigning genres that are either relevant to future workplace writing or are standard practice for professionals in the field; sequencing assignments to introduce and build on new skills; embedding a scaffolded writing process into the course itself; and providing constructive feedback on drafts. As is clear from the range of approaches in different parts of the world, however, it is also vital to tailor practices specifically to institutions, types of programs, and students’ needs in a particular culture. Bean and Weimer (2011) and Walvoord and Anderson (2009) provide reliable guides to designing and assessing student writing. A full understanding of assignments, though, rests upon knowledge of academic literacy, general and specific contexts for English for academic purposes (EAP), corpus analysis, genre, EAL instruction, and writing beyond academic contexts, among other factors. We highly recommend that readers read the related chapters in this volume to build a sense of the context that informs choices of what tasks instructors should set for their students.

**Further reading**

Bean & Weimer (2011); Melzer (2003); Soliday (2011); Thaiss et al. (2012); Walvoord & Anderson (2009)

**Related chapters**

2 General and specific EAP
3 Academic literacies
16 Corpus studies in EAP
19 Genre analysis
39 Writing centres and the turn toward multilingual and multiliteracy writing tutoring

**References**


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Undergraduate assignments and essay exams


