Designing Writing Assignments for Non-native English Speaking Students

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- Non-native speakers of English: traditional international students + “generation 1.5” (children of immigrants)
- All writers struggle with writing tasks. Academic language is no one’s first language. Learning how to write well takes time, practice, and explicit instruction for most.
- Linguistic background matters. Some problems in second language writing are caused by having learned how to do things in another language.
- Cultural background matters. Students from high power distance cultures may have trouble approaching professors to clarify tasks. Students from oral traditions may need assignments explained orally even when written instructions are provided.

Written texts are organized differently in different cultures. (Kaplan, 1966)

- Different ≠ bad. Students transfer background and linguistic knowledge from their first language, and much of it serves as a supporting system.
- Prompts matter:
  The assignment should be challenging, but the assignment sheet shouldn’t.
Anticipating how the non-native speakers are going to interact with the assignment and designing assignments sheets with this population will result in:

  - better product from the students
  - better learning outcomes
  - less time spent by the instructor clarifying what the assignment is really about
  - less anxiety & frustration for both the instructor and the student
  - greater opportunity to engage students intellectually
“Faculty have a right to expect competent writing. But they cannot expect competent writing ... [that is] an accurate reflection of content knowledge or of higher-order thinking when the written assignments lack essential information or provide too much, are unclear or contradictory, are vague or picayune.” (Alice Brand, 1992, p.157)

- Aspects of prompts that can be difficult for non-native speakers of English
  - Idiomatic language
  - Cultural references/context
  - Vague language choice
  - Instructor unpreparedness to explain something orally in multiple ways

- All students will benefit from:
  - Written instructions for all writing tasks
  - An oral review of the written instructions (phrased differently in multiple iterations)
  - A clear definition of the assignment and its purpose
  - Step-by-step guidelines about how the assignment is to be structured and formatted
  - A model assignment

- Use terminology consistently:
  - Choose one term for each assignment type/task, and use that term consistently
    - Ex: Choose either “paper” or “summary” or “essay” or “document” within a single assignment, but don’t alternate between them within a single assignment.
    - Ex: Choose either “Exploring inconsistencies between” or “contrast” or “compare” within a single assignment, but don’t alternate between them within a single assignment.

- Format assignments to facilitate comprehension: use white space, bullet points, underlining.

Visual Example

These short papers are designed to give you an opportunity to demonstrate higher level cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Please choose only one of the following two assignments. You may work by yourself or in a group of two. See the syllabus for assignment due dates.

Assignment #1: Models of Individual Behavior
We have discussed the assumptions about individual behavior that underlie the competitive economic model as well as several deviations from these assumptions that are often referred to as “behavioral economics.” You can review these in the lecture slides as well as IBC chapters 3 and 7. Given these models, please either create a short story, screen play, short film (synthesis), or analyze a piece of fiction (movie, TV episode, book) (analysis) that illustrates a model of behavior and how the individual with the chosen behavior makes a particular health-related decision.

Assignment #2: Models of Individual Behavior
We have discussed the assumptions about individual behavior that underlie the competitive economic model as well as several deviations from these assumptions that are often referred to as “behavioral economics.” You can review these in the lecture slides as well as IBC chapters 3 and 7. Given these models, please either

- Create a short story, screen play, short film (synthesis)

  OR

- Analyze a piece of fiction (movie, TV episode, book) (analysis)

Wherever you choose should illustrate a model of behavior and how the individual with the chosen behavior makes a particular health-related decision.
• Conceptual considerations from *Reid & Kroll (2006): Best Practices in Writing Assignment Design*

Assignments should be

► “contextualized” & “authentic”
► based on accessible content
► developed with clearly established evaluation criteria

• Campus resources:
  o English for Academic Purposes Program (English language classes, consultations on instructional design, language—culture—identity issues, etc.)
    CA 341
    Estela Ene, Director  eene@iupui.edu  or  274-3908
  o University Writing Center
    CA008 and University Library Locations
  o Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication (customized language programs)
    Emilie Building
    Ulla Connor, Director  uconnor@iupui.edu
  o Bepko Learning Center (tutoring)
    University College
  o Office of International Affairs
    Visa status questions, advising of international issues, cultural differences