

Progressive Assignments or, How to get students to do what you want them to.

Michael Matto
Dept. of English

12 Earle Hall (lower level)
ex. 3294
matto@adelphi.edu

I. Make sure you as the teacher understand the purpose of the assignment.

Assuming this is a major assignment that will be graded, what is the assignment designed to do in the most general sense?

- Allow you to evaluate students' retention of information
- Allow you to evaluate students' understanding of complex ideas or theories
- Allow you to evaluate students' skills
- etc.

More specifically, what does the assignment allow you to do?

- See if students can apply a concept or theory to specific cases
- See if students can generalize from specifics
- See if students can synthesize material
- See if students can find and evaluate worth of potential source material
- See if students can summarize complex arguments
- See if students can think logically
- See if students can think creatively
- See if students can write with clarity
- etc.

Even more specifically, say we want student to "use sources." Does that mean:

- Cite authorities to support statements
- Summarize prevailing opinion
- Argue with a prevailing opinion
- Pit authorities against each other in debate
 - Choose sides in such a debate
 - Synthesize diverging opinions
 - Analyze the debate itself
- Set background (historical, theoretical) for more specific discussion
- etc.

II. Anticipate what students may not be able to do, and give them the opportunity to do it *with the stakes very low.*

- informal writing exercises (not essays)
- easy (1/2 - 1 hour to prepare)
- required, but. . .
- . . . ungraded (perhaps marked "done" or "not done" with a checkmark)
- . . . perhaps even unread (or exchanged in class, or via Blackboard, for student commentary)

Common problems and possible approaches to heading them off at the pass

Too much summary, not enough analysis

Principle: Students need to summarize for themselves before moving on to analysis, even if you don't want the summary in the essay. So, provide a time when they must summarize so that they will understand that the essay they will write must do something different.

Exercise: Write a summary of the assigned reading. Make sure to include the question the author sets out to answer, what evidence the author brings to bear on that question, and the author's main point. Include any complexities, "however," or other twists in the argument. This is not an essay--you do not need an introduction or conclusion, nor do you need to comment about whether you agree. For now, simply try to be as true to the author's ideas as you can be.

Rather than analysis, students write knee-jerk reactions or dogmatic sermons

Principle: If students feel strongly about an issue, they need the opportunity to voice their (or their parents'?) deeply-felt beliefs before they can move into an analytical mode. But we don't want it in the essay, so provide a time for them to get the deep belief out, but also to consider reasonable alternative arguments.

Exercise: Think about your topic. Take ten minutes to write out an incredibly biased screed advocating your position. Then, take another ten minutes to write out an equally biased screed taking an opposing position. If you can think of a third position (not a middle road, but a true third position), take another ten minutes to produce the third screed.

Follow Up: Ask students to mark as "reasonable" (even if they disagree) and "unreasonable" (even if they agree) everything in the screeds. Discard the unreasonable, and account for all the reasonable arguments in their papers.

Quotations tend to be "crowbarred" in

Principle: A requirement to "use sources" or otherwise quote authorities often results in quotes that are violently inserted in text and left to speak for themselves. The student may have an idea about the function of the quote within his or her argument, but have not thought about the reader's need to hear it.

Exercise: In the assigned reading [or a secondary source, or whatever], find three quotations that you find intriguing or powerful. Now, write a quick email to a friend in which you explain what each quote means. Assume your friend has never read what you've read, and frankly does not care about it. Your job is both to be clear about the context of the quotation and to get your friend to see why it might be important.

Another exercise: In the assigned reading [or a secondary source, or whatever], find three quotations that you find intriguing or powerful. Type out each quotation. For each one, list out all the reasons a person might agree the ideas in the quote. Then, make another list of all the reasons a person might disagree with the ideas in the quote.

III. Once you've chosen due dates for papers, work backwards find dates on the syllabus to make the Exercises (not essay drafts!) due. Even one or two preliminary assignments (informal, ungraded) can make a significant difference.

SAMPLE PROGRESSION FROM MY ENGLISH 107 COURSE - Total Time, 4 weeks

Writing Exercise 1 - show, don't tell:

Think back to a moment of experience that has lodged itself in your memory, one that puts you into a contemplative mood. Write out this moment in such a way as to allow others to experience it as you did. Be as descriptive as you possibly can--the details are what matter here. Possibilities include your first encounter with an important object, a visit to a special place (not something as general as a week in a new city--more like 10 minutes in a certain room), a meaningful conversation, a chance encounter.

Focus on the moment itself--what you see, hear, smell, taste, feel, think. In short, show us, don't tell us, about this moment of experience. This description should be about 2 pages long.

Writing Exercise 2 - show, don't tell II:

Now that you are on the track of an idea and have a piece of evidence from WE2 that helps you think about it, it is time to make your idea more complex, multi-dimensional, by adding complication.

Think of another moment, one that intersects with but does not simply replicate the meaning you have

found in the first. You should suspect that this moment will somehow allow you to create a "yet" or a "however" in the flow of your argument. You may not yet know exactly how this will happen, but that is all right.

Write out this moment as you did the first, concentrating on the details. Do not mention WE2 or try to forge the connection yet--let this memory stand on its own. And again, show, don't tell.

Writing Exercise 8 - letter:

Write a letter to a friend (not in this class) in which you use the moments you described in WE1 and 2 as objects of investigation. The purpose of the letter should be to raise an issue or point of discussion with the friend--the stories are to act as evidence that needs to be explained in order to say something about the way the world works. Ask questions, solicit a response. This letter is exploratory, not definitive.

Remember, your friend will have no idea why you are writing unless you make it clear in your letter. You need to seduce your reader into seeing the importance or compelling nature of the ideas you see. Thus, telling the reader that you are fulfilling a requirement for an English course will not do; find another way to get your friend interested in what you have to say.

Feel free to recycle material from your earlier WEs in composing the letter. You might even cut-and-paste the most meaningful parts of WE1 and 2 into the letter.

Writing Exercise 9 - drawing on others:

This is the final step in this progression. Find a publicly accessible artwork or other meaningful reference (movie, song, essay, novel, poem) that you see to have a connection with the idea you have been exploring. Choose something in Encounters or from your own experience. Write out a description of this reference (e.g., describe the artwork, quote the poem), *then explain how you see it connect to your growing idea*. About a page.

Essay 2:

You now need to bring all your pieces of evidence together into an essay. Your goal is to say something about the way the world works, to make an interesting observation and deepen it, to express an IDEA (as we have been using the term), through illustration and analysis. Look again at the essays we have read so far this term as models--you may imitate their structures and styles to help you to shape your own writing.

The essay should be about 1200-1400 words, typed, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins.

NOTE: If you mention any other sources (including movies, songs, TV shows, etc.), you need a "Works Cited" list at the end of the essay. When you quote key phrases from a printed source, parenthetical documentation is also required. It is your responsibility to follow the guidelines you will find in A Pocket Style Guide.

ANOTHER SAMPLE PROGRESSION - more complex - total time, 6 weeks

Writing Exercise 1 - letter I:

Choose one essay from the last two lists of longer readings, one that has an idea in it that you would like to continue to think about. (You might not necessarily be interested in the topic, but you can still be intrigued by the idea--for example, you might write to Paul Fussell even if you have no interest in racing but are thinking about the cultural purpose of other a different big group event). For this WE you will write a letter to the author of the essay you have selected. In this letter you will engage the author in a discussion of an idea in his or her essay--suggest new lines of thinking; ask questions; suggest answers. You might tell the author a story that reading the essay made you remember. Seek not to praise the author but rather to earn the author's praise through your thoughtful analysis of his or her ideas.

Remember, your author will have no idea why you are writing unless you make that clear in your letter. You will therefore need to explain what essay you read, which passages interested you, etc. Telling the author that you are fulfilling a requirement for an English course will not do; find another way to get the author interested in what you have to say.

Writing Exercise 2- letter II:

For the last WE you wrote a letter to an essayist--this time you will write to a friend, one with whom you can discuss

interesting ideas. You should write about the questions that are becoming compelling to you from your reading and writing so far. You are moving away from responding to the essays you have read towards generating questions of your own. This is an exploratory letter, one in which you try to engage your friend's interest by suggesting why the questions you have are worth considering and what your thoughts are so far.

You may mention the essay you have been reading if you would like to, but your focus should be on taking your thinking further, into new areas, and asking the questions that you would honestly like to figure out the answers to. You should draw from your own experience and knowledge to engage your friend's interest: tell a story, cite an interesting fact, describe a public event, or the like. Make your friend believe that your interest should be his or her interest as well.

Writing Exercise 3 - searching for connections:

To this point you have been unearthing questions and issues that spring up when you think about your topic. You now need to consider how to find more information about the questions you have become interested in. Go to the library and use the library catalog, search engines, indexes, and other available tools to find ten references to high-quality academic or public sources that might be useful to you in thinking about your idea. (Try all kinds of searches: on the author you wrote the letter to, on the people or ideas the author mentions, by keywords about the subject you are interested in.) It will not be acceptable to come to class saying you could not find anything--you can always find something--keep experimenting with search engines and indexes until you do.

For this Writing Exercise, type up a correctly formatted MLA -style Works Cited list of these ten sources. (You do not need to read these items yet--just produce the correctly formatted Works Cited List.) Use your copy of A Pocket Style Guide for info on how to format such a list.

Writing Exercise 4 - making connections:

Read the sources you found for WE 3. Choose the two or three that strike you as the most useful. At least one should be "factual" or "primary" and one should be "analytical" or "secondary." For each, write out a short paragraph for each of the following questions:

1. What is the overall idea/purpose of the piece?
2. Why is it important to your investigation or thinking?
3. How does it confirm and/or alter your thinking about the Encounters piece you began with? Be specific--cite passages that work well to illustrate the resonances.

Writing Exercise 5 - organizing information, touring an argument:

Looking back over WEs 1-4, you should find you have produced a number of pieces of a complex essay: an issue or question of your own, many sources with resonating but sometimes contradictory ideas, statements expressing the connections among these ideas, your intellectual and emotional reactions to these ideas. Now your job is to see what they add up to by placing them into a relationship with one another. For this WE, write an outline of the essay you imagine you will write. Use the format of the idea summaries we wrote at the beginning of the term.

Essay 3:

This essay will be complicated because you now have a number of writers and other evidence to consider. Your goal is to help your reader understand the idea you have developed through your consideration of this material. Use your evidence (the thoughts of the writers you have been working with, your own observations) to take your reader through your thinking.

The essay should be about 1500-1700 words, typed, double-spaced, with 1-inch margins.

NOTE: Because this is an essay, it requires documentation. You need a "Works Cited" list at the end of the essay. When you quote key phrases from an essay, parenthetical documentation is also required. It is your responsibility to follow the guidelines you will find in A Pocket Style Guide. The essays in Encounters are cited as works in an anthology. Come to me with any specific questions after consulting A Pocket Style Guide.