CHOOSING THE RIGHT TYPE OF WRITING ASSIGNMENT
Faculty Resource Series

Not all communication assignments are created equal: the types of skills a student needs to write a research paper are quite different than those needed to write an oral history. Additionally, a communication assignment should align closely with the learning outcomes for the course as a whole—an essay on Einstein's life in an upper-level physics class will feel misaligned and confusing to both the instructor and students, even if it is vaguely topically-related and technically helps the course check off (C)-designation requirements.

This guide is intended to provide a (non-comprehensive!) list of ideas for the types of communication assignments you may assign in your courses. Use it to help you decide what kind of assignment might work best for you.

How to use this guide

Below is a chart mapping different types of writing assignment on the dimensions of cognitive and writing tasks. The horizontal dimension is a modified version of Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), listing cognitive tasks in order of development; that is, *understanding* is simpler than *reflect*. Choose this dimension to align with the learning outcomes of your class and assignment. The vertical dimension lists writing tasks, also in order of development; that is, *summarizing* is often simpler than *arguing* (Kaufer & Butler, 2000). Assignments that are vertically higher will be more challenging for students and they might need more support, but are also often more realistic genres for most professions.

After the chart is description of each assignment type, with an explanation of how it challenges students in regards to the course material.

Analysis

Have students analyze an artifact. You may ask students to use a specific analytic lens: for example, perhaps a student should do a feminist reading of a text, or analyze a system in regards to its efficiency.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to engage in heavy description of the artifact, and to point out relevant pieces for their purpose and explain what they mean.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to think carefully about the content they analyze, as well as how to present all of the pieces of their interpretation in a cohesive way.

Annotated bibliography

Have students gather a list of sources, summarize each, and present a brief analysis of how it is useful for their purposes.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to demonstrate their understanding of texts through summary, and briefly describe how it relates to a given or chosen goal.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to choose texts for a specific purpose, roughly understand each text, and begin seeing links between them as related to a goal.

Book review

Have students choose (or assign them) a book, and ask them to summarize and critique it for a specific audience. For example, a student may review a book for a general audience, or for a scholarly one—the audience choice will change the nature of the review.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to demonstrate their understanding of a whole book through summary, and to present a critique that is relevant to an audience.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to deeply understand the book, as well as be able to critically think about it in relation to an audience's interests and knowledge.

Case study

Have students examine a particular real-world case in detail and present a deep understanding of the complexities and operations of the situation. For example, a history student may examine the French Revolution as a case study of early democracies, or a biology student may examine the SARS-CoV-2 strain as a case study of coronaviruses.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to describe a particular object or event, as well as to highlight features that make it unique and explain why.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to deeply understand both the broader category they are studying, as well as the nuances and complexities of the particular case. This task allows students to engage with how theory implements in real-world situations.

Editorial/magazine article

Have students write a short piece about a topic, as might appear in a newspaper or magazine. For example, a student might write about a new archeological find for the *Chicago Tribune* or the *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to describe a technical concept to a general, public audience. They must choose what aspects of the topic are interesting to the public, and describe them in a sufficient amount of detail such that it can be understood by a general audience but still be informative.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to deeply understand the topic, decide what is important versus extraneous information, and identify what aspects of the topic are specialized knowledge.

Encyclopedia entry

Have students write a short piece about a topic, as might appear in an encyclopedia entry.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to describe a technical concept to a general, public audience. They must choose what aspects of the topic are important to a comprehensive understanding of the topic, gather sources to provide evidence for their descriptions, and describe the topic in a sufficient amount of detail such that it can be understood by a general audience.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to deeply understand the topic, decide what is important versus extraneous information, gather reliable sources on the topic, and identify what aspects of the topic are specialized knowledge.

Instruction manual

Have students write manual for how to operate something, such as a manual for installing an engine or installing a computer program.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to chunk a lot of related information into smaller pieces, and identify the connections between them. Students will need to write clearly and definitively to a less-knowledgeable audience, focusing on process and instruction, and using description of the object only to supplement instruction on operation.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to break down a long process into steps, as well as fully understand the capabilities of the object being described. They will also need to consider how a technical object that needs instruction might be understood by an outsider.

Journal

Have students keep a journal of their own thoughts over the course of a project or course. Journal entries are often quite free and unstructured in form, but allow the student to reflect upon their own learning, and for you as the instructor to gain insight and respond to students' learning.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to name and explain developments in their own thinking in a sequential manner.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to cognitively reflect upon their own learning, and understand what they have learned and how.

Lab report

Have students write a report on an experiment that they conducted.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to introduce and justify a research question or hypothesis, describe methods and materials in detail, accurately represent results, and explain how the results answer a guiding question. Lab reports are often highly structured, but require students to clearly explain each piece and how they fit together.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to understand how their methods are suited to a research question, as well as how results answer an initial guiding research question.

Literature review

Have students craft a narrative that reviews relevant published scholarship on a certain topic. This task is especially well-suited for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students who need to gather a feel for the research in a given area.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to identify and name common and prominent lines of ideas across a research topic. In writing a review, a student must organize a review around these lines, and briefly describe aspects of specific texts as argumentative support for these lines.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to demonstrate strong research skills to locate important literature on a topic (as well as define the topic, if it is not defined for them), understand the gist of all pieces they read, and see threads of connection across a large swath of literature.

Memo

Have students write a brief update on a project's progress, usually directed to other team members or stakeholders (in an academic setting, perhaps you, the instructor!).

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to briefly summarize key project updates, and to frame them in such a way that is informative and useful to other team members. Students often struggle with getting "lost in the weeds" of a technical project, and this task asks them to move away from their own tasks and imagine and write for others.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to identify the major developments in a project (as opposed to minor details), as are important to other stakeholders and team members.

Oral history

Have students record (audio or video) an individual's story, especially recounting a particular historical episode or event. For example, a student may record a southside Chicago resident's experience of redlining over their lifetime. This is an especially useful way to

record and archive the lived experiences around particular ideas or events. These oral histories are frequently transcribed, and accompanied by a summary and analysis.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to potentially transcribe spoken speech (which is fraught with linguistic difficulties!), and to organize a summary or analysis around key points for a particular purpose. In doing so, students will need to summarize swaths of the interview, and describe them in relation to historical events.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to prepare interview questions that will probe the recorded person for relevant information, but in a way that is respectful of their own lived experience and context. The student will also need to review the interview in order to extract key and interesting information, and interpret it in terms of the socio-historical context.

Oral presentation

Have students give a conference-style presentation on a project to the class. This might be done on an individual or group-basis. Most presentations are roughly 5-20 minutes long, and usually include visual aids. See the CAC guide on assigning oral presentations for advice on giving this assignment well and equitably.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to summarize their project into key takeaways for an audience, including by motivating and framing their project to an outside audience. Students will also need to practice speaking skills in a way that is accessible to others, and practice using visual aids to back up their arguments.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to identify the primary framing and accomplishments of their project, and decide how all of the details of their in-depth project are interesting and relevant to an outside audience.

Personal narrative

Have students write a narrative of their own experience on a particular topic. For example, a student may write a personal narrative about their time living in a particular type of housing.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to summarize aspects of their lived experience in a chronological and narrative format, as well as to highlight certain aspects over others in a way that is informative and interesting to the chosen audience.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to recount information sequentially, and choose pieces from their lived experience that are relevant to the task.

Podcast or short video

Have students create a podcast or Youtube-style short video explaining a technical topic to the public.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to translate technical information to the public, as well as heavily summarize technical information in a way that can be understood by a public audience. In a video format, it also asks the students to use visual aids as part of their argument.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to identify aspects of a technical or detailed topic that are interesting and flashy to the public, as well as consider what aspects are critical (and not) for understanding the topic at hand.

Position paper/argumentative essay

Have students take a position on an issue, and argue for their position in a researched essay.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to present a thesis as a main claim, and organize an essay around supporting points for this thesis. Students will need to represent and cite evidence accurately as part of this argumentative structure.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to decide upon a thesis, and create a clear logical and argumentative structure to back up their thesis. Ideally, students should also consider possible counterarguments and sources of evidence as part of their argumentative structure.

Reflection

Have students write a short piece identifying what skills they had to use to complete a task, and how they were challenged in regards to their skillset before the task. For example, you may have a student write a short reflection on a final project, asking them to identify what they learned and what was challenging and why.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to name and explain developments in their own learning. They will need to organize the text around challenging aspects of their learning, and write in a first-person mode that is accessible to other readers.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to cognitively reflect upon their own learning and then organize these reflections into themes by seeing connections among experiences. Research has shown that cognitively reflecting upon learning helps students to keep and transfer these skills to new contexts ([Yancey, 1998](#)).

Research paper

Have students write an original research paper on a specific topic. You may assign a student a topic to learn more about, or allow them to pursue a topic related to the course. Regardless, students should ideally orient this paper around a novel claim or finding (similar to a standard academic research paper).

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to identify a key claim or finding, and choose an argumentative structure that appropriately forwards this claim. They will need to adequately frame their research in terms of current literature, describe their methods and findings, and analyze their findings in relation to current research.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to conduct novel research on a particular topic, and present their findings as a novel claim or insight. Most research papers take a thesis-driven, IMRaD, or problem-solution macrostructure, and students will need to understand how their ideas fit into one of these rough structures.

Summary

Have students write a summary of a longer text in order to demonstrate their understanding of it.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to restate a text's argument in their own words, and then organize their own text around explaining the argument structure of another text. Students will need to demonstrate the ability to rephrase a lot of information in a more compact form.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to identify the key argument(s) of a text, and the supporting evidence and lines of reasoning.

Technical or process documentation

Have students write documentation for a user or technician on a particular object or process. This type of assignment is especially well-suited for students who build objects or processes, and need to document and describe them to a broader audience.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to describe in appropriate (to the audience) detail various features or steps of a process, and to organize a document around operating and understanding that particular object or process.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to "chunk" the features or steps of their object or process, and decide upon which aspects are particularly useful to a given audience. This requires students to step outside their role as designers, and think in terms of users about which aspects are important.

Technical report

Have students write a report on the outcomes of a particular project. Technical reports are often considered "grey literature," and include technical information about a project that may not be finished or ready for public consumption. Most frequently, technical reports are prepared for sponsors or companies.

Communication tasks: This task asks the student to identify important information in a project, and describe this information in appropriate detail for a particular audience. Students will need to focus in on key takeaways and results, and describe relevant methods and steps only as relevant to the important findings.

Cognitive tasks: Students will need to identify the aspects of a technical project that are relevant to a particular audience. Very frequently, technical reports look like a summary of the project at hand, with an emphasis on results and key takeaways.