SEQUENCING AND SCAFFOLDING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
Faculty Resource Series

Writing happens in many phases: brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, editing. Experienced writers tend to touch on each of these phases at least once, often moving recursively to one and then back to another as they fully develop their ideas (early cognitive research even found that writing processes are highly intertwined with thought on the writing topic!). For students who are knee-deep in learning the ideas *and* how to write in new academic genres, it is critical to help them through the writing process as part of developing their thinking on content matter.

Composition research has consistently shown that structuring and sequencing writing assignments is incredibly helpful to students not just in learning to write, but also in learning the content matter (e.g., Rankin, 1990; Beaufort, 2007). This guide is intended to help you learn to scaffold and sequence writing assignments productively in your courses.

Some definitions: "scaffolding" and "sequencing"

"Scaffolding" and "sequencing" are related terms, but slightly different in meaning. "Sequencing" refers to ordering assignments in terms of a standard writing process. In other words, you may have students turn in an outline, then a rough draft, and then a final draft. "Scaffolding" refers to the ways in which assignments cognitively build on each other: a proposal requires less carefully developed thought than a full draft, for example.

Building writing scaffolding in sequencing into your course

Many courses have at least one major writing assignment. For example, in an engineering class, students may complete a final project and write a report about it; in a history class, students may choose a specific topic from the course and write a research paper on it.

We highly recommend that major writing assignments are scaffolded as a sequence of several smaller assignments that build to a final paper. In other words, major writing assignments should ideally have many parts. Below is a list of possible assignments that students could be tasked with for a major writing project. Consider choosing 2-3 from this list for your course.

Pre-writing	Drafting	Revising
• Concept map • Project proposal • Annotated bibliography • Thesis draft • Paper outline	• Partial draft (e.g., 1-3 sections) • Rough draft	• Peer review • Reflection • "Track changes" draft • Project presentation • Final draft

Below is an example assignment sequence for an upper-level seminar course in communications:

Due Dates

- Proposal (10% of final grade)   Mar 1
- Partial draft/results (5% of final grade)   Apr 10
- Rough draft (5% of final grade)   Apr 24
- Presentation (10% of final grade)   Apr 24 or 26
- Final paper (30% of final grade)   May 2

Assignment Descriptions

Proposal. The proposal should be 2-4 pages long (double-spaced, 12pt font), and should include the following: 1) a research question, 2) a brief review of relevant scholarship that helps you to justify that question (include at least 4 scholarly sources, which can be drawn from class readings or elsewhere); 3) a plan for the analysis or work that you need to conduct (more of a lit review? Textual analysis? Developing new tools or techniques?). This paper is primarily an opportunity to get feedback from me on the project you are considering before diving too far in.

Partial draft/results. Submit a completed "chunk" of your project, ideally including any major results or analysis. This should be approximately 1-3 pages, and should include a draft of your main argument/claim. This is primarily to get feedback on how your project is progressing. It will be graded on completeness and progress toward your project.

Rough draft. Submit a full rough draft of your paper. I'll give you detailed writing and content/argument feedback on this.

Presentation. Give a 5-minute presentation to the class on your final project. This is a way to hear about what everyone else in the class has done, share what interesting things you have done/found in your work, and get some feedback from peers before completing the final paper.

Final paper. The final paper should be roughly 10-15 pages long (double-spaced, 12pt font). It should include a thesis/main claim that argues for some new insight into a text or language theoretically by means of computational text analysis. You should include at least 5 scholarly sources (3+ should be sources you find on your own). You are welcome to use APA, MLA, or IEEE citation/formatting style – just choose one and be consistent with it.

Won't grading this many assignments be more work for me?

Yes and no. While this may be more assignments than you are used to giving, it tends to actually cut down on work across the course overall. One of the wonderful things about scaffolding assignments is that it requires students to present their initial ideas to you very early. This means you can intervene before a student gets too far down the wrong rabbit

hole, and thus avoid panicked meetings and emails when a student realizes they are too far off track. In doing so, it also helps set the student up for more success.

Additionally, when you grade these early assignments, keep in mind that you are grading for *ideas*, not *writing*. That is, early assignments like outlines or rough drafts only need to be graded on the clarity and development of ideas: these are simply an opportunity for students to check their thinking with you. This also means they may be able to replace other assignments that appear earlier in the course. Spend only 5-10 minutes grading something like an outline, focusing on high-level feedback (see the CAC guide on giving feedback). Then, worry about the low-level ideas and writing in later drafts.