

The Anti-Racist Classroom

Writing effective assignments

with Zora Neale Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God

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Writing Center

Franklin College of Arts and Sciences

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This resource was created from a major assignment designed by Sidonia Serafini for her ENGL 1102 class.

What makes a writing assignment effective?

A poorly-written or incomplete assignment can lead to confused students and frustrated teachers, and it can prevent students with diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds from engaging with the writing process.

Major assignments occupy the core of a composition course, and writing an effective assignment is a crucial factor in creating student success. Information about academic writing genres may seem obvious to seasoned writers, but can be completely unfamiliar to students who are new to the subject area.

An effective writing assignment will answer the following student questions:

- How does this assignment build on what we have done thus far in this class?
- What skills or competencies will I need to use or develop in order to succeed at this assignment?
- What will success look like and how will it be evaluated?
- What resources will my instructor provide in order to support my writing?
- When and how should I get started?

The following writing assignment, which asks students to engage with the historical context of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, successfully implements strategies instructors can use to communicate their assignments effectively.

From the assignment sheet:

Equipped with the analytical skills learned from composing the close reading analysis essay...you will focus on a particular historical, cultural or social aspect of [this novel]. Your interpretation will focus on a close reading...but will also reach... to understand the historical, cultural, or social context in which [the novel] was created.

When describing the assignment, be as specific as possible! E.g., if you want students to use specific sources, say so!

An effective writing assignment will answer the questions: What is the purpose of this assignment? and What skills will students need in order to be successful?

To shed light on/give additional perspective to your interpretation of the novel, you will incorporate two (2) additional sources: 1) a primary non-fiction work by Hurston (autobiography, essays, articles, anthropological writing, folklore collections) and 2) a historical document (newspaper articles or advertisements, speeches, court cases, etc.)

(See the handout on primary works by Hurston and the “Historical Sources Guide” on eLC for suggestions.)

When designing an assignment, make sure you provide the resources your students need to complete the work well and with confidence! You may need to create or source guides or handouts. You can also use scaffolding to help students build the necessary skills.

From the assignment sheet cont':

Due Dates:

Tuesday, Feb. 19: Research methods activity in Emma Lab

Thursday, Feb. 21: CLASS IN LIBRARY! Meet in entrance of Main Library (up the hill from Park Hall). Bring Making Literature Matter!

Tuesday, Feb. 26: Conferences in Ms. Serafini's office

Thursday, Feb. 28: Revised thesis statement and topic sentences due (two paper copies)
Bring in two sources for your paper to share with the class

Thursday Mar. 7: Paper 2 Draft due by the start of class (700 words)—upload in Emma with proper title, file as Folder: Paper 2, Label: Draft, Sharing: Shared

One of the strengths of this assignment is the inclusion of benchmarks. Breaking the assignment down into a series of smaller and more manageable tasks allows students to build good writing habits and understand writing as a process.

BONUS: Establishing benchmarks also helps students take advantage of opportunities for in-process feedback!

Are you drafting a writing assignment? Not sure whether you are communicating your expectations clearly or providing enough student support?

Make an appointment with the Writing Center today!

Peer Review Workshop

Mar. 11-15 Spring Break—No Class

Tuesday, Mar. 19: Paper 2 Final Draft due by the start of class (1,200-1,500 words)—upload in Emma