Pitfalls in Writing Assignments

Listed below are some of the kinds of problems likely to produce what harried students and tutors call “Assignments from Hell.” The specific examples in each category have been gathered from a variety of colleges and universities around the nation, and names have been omitted to protect the guilty.

1. Use intimidating diction:
   - Carefully summarize and then faithfully represent and clearly articulate what is at the heart of the reading. You must provide logical links between ideas and responsibly use paraphrase and quotation.
   - Show in a precise manner how Dillman’s definitions and relationships agree with your own. Use concrete examples to illustrate your understanding and to expand your reader’s insight. You are expected to be in control of your subject, not to pad with unnecessary words, and to display a mature understanding which synthesizes classwork, lectures, and readings.

2. Encourage fragmentary responses, idle speculation, or frivolity:
   - What factors might have caused Shirley Jackson to write such a story?
   - Is there any one book that you would like to read but never seem to find the time? What and why?
   - By October 5, each student will submit a six to seven page paper (typed and double spaced) in which he discusses the novel with particular emphasis on the following questions:
     1. Who or what is responsible for the suffering of the mine workers?
     2. Discuss Etienne Lantier as the victim and M. Hennebeau as the villain. How fair is this characterization?
     3. Compare and contrast the political views of Etienne, Rasseneur, and Souvarine. With whom does Zola sympathize? How can you tell?
     4. What is the point of recounting the collapse of Deneulin’s enterprise? Why does Zola include this in the novel?

   Keep in mind that this is not merely a list of questions to be answered, but rather a list of themes to be addressed in a cohesive essay. Be sure to begin with a general introduction and develop your arguments logically. You may deal with the above questions in any order you like. You should cite specific passages from the book to support your arguments, but do not over-
quote. All quotations from the book should indicate the page number where it can be found in the novel. Essays will be graded on style, syntax, and grammar as well as content.

• Compare the soul of an onion with the destiny of man.

• Prove that Hitler was a maniac.

3. **Are vague or assume knowledge students don’t have:**

• (For ESL students) Describe your reactions to American culture and manners.

• Most recognize the necessary trade-offs in a democratic society between freedom of speech and government secrecy. Even the most ardent advocates of civil liberties recognize the need for secrecy in certain areas of governmental activities. Develop a framework for differentiating between public and classified information.

• Write your first paper over either *The Odyssey* or *The Inferno*: choices for the second paper are *Utopia* or *Candide*.

4. **Pose numerous questions, provoking incoherence:**

• Compare and/or contrast the reason(s) the U.S. invaded Granada and be sure to form conclusions on your own after synthesizing your sources. Was the invasion justified? Why or why not? How did the media treat the invasion?

• Discuss one of the basic freedoms of our Constitution. The American people have traditionally expressed support for all of the basic freedoms, yet we are often non-supportive when it comes to specifics. For example, Americans state they are solidly for Freedom of Speech yet flinch at the idea of the Klu Klux Klan or the American Nazi Party being free to demonstrate and express their views. Your paper should trace the constitutional interpretation of one of the basic freedoms and list the important cases regarding this interpretation. To what degree has the public supported this interpretation? What political (or other) conflicts has this caused? State where you believe the Supreme Court should draw the line. Reinforce your argument with case data or other research. If you believe the right to be absolute, then so state and support it. The paper will be graded on the conciseness of your research and the cohesiveness of your argument.

• Compare Hobbes and Locke, two seventeenth century Englishmen who lived in a period of civil war. Both came to theorize about the nature of man, the nature of the state, and the relationship between man and state. In particular, they discussed something they called the “social contract.” You should compare these two thinkers’ ideas about these subjects. Here are some important questions you might consider: How do Locke and Hobbes view man in a state of nature? What is the role of property for each thinker? How does each thinker view man’s nature (evil? good? or something in between?). According to each thinker, how rational is man? How does each thinker view man’s natural rights and the idea of natural law? how does each thinker understand the nature and function of government? What does the “social contract”
mean to each thinker? Where do a government’s powers come from for Locke and for Hobbes? What is the limit of a government’s powers for each? Why do men create government?

5. Are too personal:

• Describe a particularly embarrassing moment or event in your life.

• Suppose your father suffered from a work-related disability, either black lung disease or asbestosis. Discuss the role of the government in regulating the workplace in order to protect the health and safety of workers like your father.

• Relate the feelings of guilt experienced and expressed by Mr. Hooper and the townspeople to a personal experience in which you felt the pangs of guilt (e.g., cheating on an exam, lying to a teacher or parent, defaming the character of a fellow student, receiving unearned praise for work which is not your own). Be specific. Use examples from the story to make comparisons.

6. Pit novice writers against professionals:

• Read Ahren’s “The Great American Football Ritual” and Cleaver’s “Blood Lust.” Using these essays as models, choose and define an activity (such as a sporting event, the drive-in trend, courtship rituals) as a symbol of some aspect of American society. Make sure your essay reveals more than just something about the activity; it should cause the reader to think critically about the society which produces and enjoys that activity.

• Write a narrative in which you describe an experience from your past which left an indelible impression on you. Use as your model Dillard’s narrative of the Polythemus moth or her attempt to outrun the man she had snowballed.

7. Have no stipulated audience and/or purpose to help students define the context in which they are writing:

• Although acts of terrorism are not considered a normal feature of the American political scene, the bombing of abortion clinics is one indication that violence has become more prevalent in recent years in the U.S. Without becoming bogged down in a debate over the subject of abortion, discuss the right of privacy vis-a-vis protect activities and public opinion.

• Explore the complexities of an issue; develop and support your own perspective. Possible topics: 1) Bilingual education in the schools. (When funds are limited, should money go to bilingual education or to other language/support programs for other groups?) or 2) Affirmative action or reverse discrimination.

• Discuss the significance of something in your life that failed to be as great as you thought it would be.

• Compare your ideas about something with those of your parents.
8. **Have contradictory or conflicting audiences:**

   • Using what you have read in Haberman about sex education counseling for teens, write a report to your high school principal.

   • Write a letter to your friend or someone in this class in which you recall an event or place with special significance to you.

9. **Emphasize mechanics and format over content:**

   • Summary of a two-page assignment: The first page and a half spell out requirements for page length, late penalties, documentation guidelines, and plagiarism warnings. The concluding paragraph on the second page contains the actual topic. Attached is a list of 65 rules of grammar to heed.

10. **Contain presuppositions:**

    • “War, disease, and famine are necessary to the preservation of mankind.” Discuss.

    • Select two ads from current magazines and analyze them in terms of how they manipulate our emotions and how they overlap or coincide with the values of the power structure in our society.

    • Recently, we have witnessed an increase of banning of books from shelves of public and school libraries. Discuss circumstances when books should be removed from shelves. What are the implications of acquiescing to the removal of one book?

    • Write a letter to the editor of the student newspaper describing a problem you see on campus. Suggest a solution and ways that solution can be implemented.

11. **Ask for too much or do not indicate the level of generality that is acceptable:**

    • Write a document analysis, of about 500 words, selected from one of the following documents in the Tierney and Scott volume:

      Thucydides  
      Plutarch, *Lycurgus*  
      Plato, *Republic*  
      Aristotle, *Politics*  
      Edict of Milan and Theodosian Code  
      Augustine, *The Two Cities*

      Put the document in historical context. Explain and interpret the significance of the document for its own time, and also relate any continuing significance of the document beyond its own time.