Imaginative Writing Assignments

A) Creating an assignment.

By imaginative writing assignments, we mean writing assignments that ask students to actively use their imaginations. These assignments may ask students to imagine themselves or others in other identities or worlds. They may be highly realistic (e.g., a business case study involving a real corporation and considerable documentation) or highly fantastic (e.g., a first person narrative of a highly intelligent silicon-based life form on the fourth planet of the Alpha Centauri system).

**Examples**

1) In a history course, students are asked to imagine themselves in some particular role during an event (e.g., the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War) and to write a letter to a friend or family member describing their perceptions, opinions, and feelings about what is happening. (Obviously, there are many possible variations on this task. Roles may be assigned and common, assigned and different, chosen from a particular set, or completely open. Roles might be well known public figures or private individuals—historical or imagined. Students might be asked to take up two roles embodying very different perspectives.)

2) In a landscape design course, students are asked to quickwrite a vivid detailed narrative of a person visiting a site that they are developing a design for. They are asked to describe the perceptions, feelings, and thoughts of the person and how the site environment affects the person. (As a follow-up assignment, students reflect on the narrative and consider whether any specific design changes might be suggested.)

3) Students in a geography course are asked to write a first person narrative of a water molecule as it travels through the hydrological cycle.

4) In an extended scenario/role play for an Environmental Studies course, groups of students take on different institutional roles (governmental—state and federal EPA, federal court, local city government; corporate; and organizational—Greenpeace, a corporate PAC) for a two-week negotiation around the siting of a toxic waste dump. Each group has to produce internal documents (e.g., memos) and external documents (e.g., press releases; testimony for EPA review; letters to other groups).

5) Students in an American literature course are asked to rewrite a part of Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, altering some feature of it (e.g., the actions of a particular character, the gender of a character, a particular event in the novel, the historical context—perhaps placing it in the 1990s, the author—perhaps as Mark Twain would have written it, or the genre—perhaps as the script for a TV show) and exploring the consequences of that alteration.

6) Students in a chemistry class are asked to rewrite the procedures and results of their last lab experiment as if it had been done in the microgravity of a spacelab on the Discovery.

B. Goals, resources and responses

In designing an imaginative writing assignment, three key issues should be considered: goals, resources and response.
First, what goals does the assignment address? The assignment might rehearse content, support other writing assignments or in-class work, prepare students for tests, develop problem-solving skills, develop inquiry and communication processes, appeal to student interest, facilitate personal connections to course materials, and so on.

Second, what resources are needed to enable and enrich the assignment? Resources might include actual or hypothetical background knowledge, actual or hypothetical documents, pictures or other graphic images, personal experiences, models, access to information, and so on.

Third, how should such assignments be responded to? Should they be graded or simply counted? Should they be read by peers or outside audiences as well as the instructor? To what extent should response focus on content, creativity, form?