# 7
# Writing Assignments

*Writing and Thinking*
*Kinds of Writing Assignments*
*Setting the Assignment*
*Feedback, Grading, and Revising*
*Plagiarism*

In this chapter, we'll consider assignments in which students write papers of one sort or another. The amount of text that is produced usually is greater than an answer to an essay question on a test, and the writing typically takes place outside the classroom. There are two general reasons for using writing assignments: (a) The paper serves as a report on some learning activity—it serves to demonstrate that a student has completed some task or that a student understands some designated course material. In effect, the paper serves as an alternative to answering exam questions or making an oral report. (b) A paper might be assigned because the instructor considers the act of writing to be important (Klugh, 1983). The focus here is on writing itself, rather than on some other activity that is reported by means of a paper. These two reasons, of course, are not mutually exclusive; an instructor might both assign an activity that is deemed important and require a paper based on that activity because creating the paper will contribute to the student's learning in a special way.

## WRITING AND THINKING

People learn to speak and to comprehend a spoken native language through everyday living; in contrast, writing and reading involve additional symbols and rules, and mastering these skills requires extensive, focused practice that is different from basic day-to-day living. All of these skills, of course, exist at multiple levels—chatting with a friend is different from giving a speech, for example. Speaking and writing are means of communicating ideas to others as well as to ourselves. Effective communication requires thought about both the ideas to be expressed and the technique of expression; indeed, it is difficult to separate the message from the medium, perhaps especially in writing. People sometimes speak "without much thought," saying something and then commenting "That's

not what I wanted to say" and correcting their statements. Well-thought-out and well-expressed oral statements can fail to yield successful communication, as indicated by listeners' responses such as "I don't understand" or blank stares. In most situations, this feedback allows the speaker to try to adjust what is said until a satisfactory reaction occurs. In addition, the listener usually can ask questions to help in clarifying the message. In writing, misstatements should be corrected by reviewing and revising the text; however, there is no opportunity to adjust to less-than-desired comprehension. Rather, the writer must anticipate the reader's level of relevant knowledge and what statements will be effective. Furthermore, writing lacks the extra-lexical cues that ordinarily accompany speech—changes in pitch and loudness, facial expressions, and gestures. Although a limited set of visual markers is available in writing, such as italics, bold print, or all caps ("NOW" seems to be shouting), and although punctuation can be used to indicate textual relations, the words in writing carry a heavier burden than the "words" in speaking. For these reasons, writing is more demanding intellectually than speaking.

Our unexpressed thoughts are often vague, incomplete, even piecemeal. Speaking about a topic encourages greater coherence, but even here we might still be vague and disorganized, relying on conversational give-and-take to produce some common understanding. In a discussion, people might not even feel a need to be organized and coherent; rather, being "relevant" might seem sufficient. Writers must move things ahead on their own, and even minimally effective writing requires some organization. Consequently, the act of writing makes people consider their thoughts more carefully than they otherwise might do. And because of the more formal character of writing, compared to speaking, writing increases the demand to be clear, organized, and coherent. In a very real sense, writing about a topic can help people formulate their thoughts on the subject. Students tend to believe that writing is just a matter of delivering the message after they have thought about the topic (Sternberg, 1988). However, the fact is that writing can and should be an essential part of thinking about a subject.

The stream of speech itself is too fleeting to ponder, and, ordinarily, one utterance is closely followed by another, making review virtually impossible. Few people have the opportunity to review audio tapes or videotapes of themselves talking. By constructing a more permanent product, writing provides an opportunity for people to reflect on their thoughts. Writing objectifies a person's thoughts. Even a cursory review of what one has written can alert a person to previously unconsidered aspects of one's beliefs or to relative strengths and weaknesses of what one has written.

To summarize, the relation between writing and thinking is bidirectional. Obviously, one cannot write coherently about a topic without thinking coherently. Grades on papers have been found to be correlated with scores on standard reasoning tests (Dominowski, Dallob, & Penningroth, 1994). The act of writing also influences thinking, as described above. One direct effect of writing assignments

is that students can be required to justify or explain their choices, compared to merely selecting an answer as in a multiple-choice test. Students tend to be weak at justifying answers (Applebee, 1984). Appropriate writing assignments therefore can help students to develop reasoning skills.

## KINDS OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Special, creative writing classes might require students to write poems, short stories, or novels, which will not be considered here. More generally, writing assignments ask students to create expository prose, writing about a topic in some fashion. Nodine (1998) described two broad classes of assignments that are distinguished by their basic purposes. *Expressive* writing is done for the students' benefit, to help them understand a topic. *Transactional* writing has the major goal of providing information to an audience (often the instructor). Commonly used assignments such as term papers and laboratory reports are transactional in Nodine's terms. Sternberg (1988) characterizes such assignments as *persuasive* writing to emphasize the goal of getting one's point across to the reader.

*Expressive Writing.*   Such assignments are short and typically ungraded (Nodine, 1998). The basic idea is to have students react to and think about some topic by writing a brief paper. These are, in Nodine's terms, writing-to-learn papers. After listening to a lecture or reading some textual material, students might be asked to summarize the material, describe what they think is most interesting, or respond to a question that encourages them to think about the topic. Nodine suggests that such brief writing activities, lasting perhaps just a few minutes, should be incorporated into lectures. Because every student writes, there is greater participation than in a class discussion where only a few students take an active role. In addition, students' papers can be used to encourage subsequent discussion.

There is evidence that writing summaries can aid learning. Davis and Hult (1997) found that students who were asked to write a summary of a lecture showed better recall of lecture material on tests given after a delay of nearly two weeks, compared to those who did not write summaries. Similarly, Radmacher and Latosi-Sawin (1995) found that students who wrote weekly summaries of textbook material earned higher grades on a final exam than students who were not required to do so. Furthermore, having students write short answers to questions yields more learning than answering multiple-choice questions or just reading (Applebee, 1984). As these findings suggest, having students write briefly about course material can aid learning.

Nodine suggests that expressive writing activities should be ungraded. The emphasis should be on the ideas generated rather than on grammar or quality of exposition. She points out that the purpose is to get students' ideas on paper

where they can be reviewed, that expressive writing can serve to stimulate discussion. Such papers are not finished products.

Another form of expressive writing is the journal. According to Hettich (1976), a student journal is not a diary; rather, it is a record of thoughts and experienced events that are related to course content. Entries tend to be short, ranging from only a few sentences to several pages. The central idea is to have students think about course content when they are away from the classroom. In addition to having students think more about a course, a journal can prompt students to relate course material to aspects of everyday living. As with the other forms of expressive writing, journals usually are not graded; as Hettich puts it, any entry having some connection to course material is acceptable.

These writing assignments could, of course, be graded. For example, summaries of articles, textbook sections, or lectures could be readily assessed for accuracy and completeness. Other assignments, such as journal entries, would be difficult to evaluate on a systematic basis without prescribing the form and content to be entered. However, structuring assignments and grading them beyond general, minimal compliance with assignment instructions changes the assignment drastically. Writing assignments are expressive because of their purpose, to allow students to think about course material for their own benefit, rather than to demonstrate knowledge or understanding to another.

*Persuasive Writing.*    The more common writing assignments require students to demonstrate that they have done one or more things well. Term papers, lab reports, book reports, and critiques all ask writers to persuade readers (instructors) that the ideas expressed are well founded and carefully argued. These assignments also reflect the completion of some activity such as collecting data or library research. This kind of writing is what people usually have in mind when referring to writing assignments, writing skills, or improving writing. Here, issues of grammar, word usage, and style do matter, and the goal is to be clear, direct, and convincing.

Four broad classes of persuasive writing assignments can be distinguished readily and were listed above. Laboratory reports, more generally research reports, are highly constrained, formulaic papers ranging from very brief, minimally written reports to mini-journal articles. The format is determined by the relevant discipline—sociology, biology, and psychology papers, for example, use different terminology and citation procedures. Nonetheless, research reports generally have four major sections: problem, methods, results, and discussion. The methods and results sections require descriptive writing, methods dealing with relatively concrete procedures and results concerning perhaps more complex analytic techniques. In their own ways, these sections reflect the writer's understanding of what was done as well as the writer's understanding of what should be described and what form descriptions should take. Problem sections, or introductions, and discussions require interpretation and inference making and

are likely to concern more abstract and complex conceptual material. Overall quality of research reports therefore should be more strongly related to the problem and discussion sections than to the methods or results sections. Differences in relevant knowledge and comprehension will more likely be reflected in these interpretive sections. The expected level of quality will vary with course level; for example, introductory students cannot reasonably be expected to understand complex procedures, concepts, and theoretical issues at a level appropriate to seniors majoring in a discipline.

Book and article reports are ways for students to demonstrate that they understand something they have read and that they can discuss the material intelligently. To a considerable degree, book reports are extended summaries, which, as noted above, can be evaluated for accuracy and completeness. What else will be in a book report depends on instructors' choices. Students might be asked, in addition to summarizing the reading, to relate the reading to textbook or lecture material, to critique the author's argument, or to apply the reading to an example, among other possibilities. These reports will inevitably have a summarizing/comprehension component, with additional factors depending on the instructor's choice of specific questions.

Term papers typically are literature reviews, and that is the form discussed here. The student selects a topic, perhaps from a list provided by the instructor, and must then find readings relevant to that topic to serve as the basis of the paper. A clear influence on the eventual quality of the paper is the quality of the set of readings that the student uses. In many circumstances, students need help with conducting literature searches. For example, university libraries now provide access to a wide variety of literature databases; giving students guidance as to how to access and use such databases can save them time and frustration. A potential problem for literature reviews concerns the number of articles (or other readings) to include. As the number of included items increases, so does the number of items to be searched, the time to scan abstracts to decide on likely inclusion, the time to read selected articles, the time to organize them—the time to complete each step in the process from topic selection to finished paper. It makes sense that undergraduates should be asked to write limited literature reviews. It further makes sense to tell the students the minimum and maximum number of readings to include. Once one abandons the goal of being "exhaustive," the appropriate number of readings is whatever number suits the assignment. Even a small number, three to five readings, can be enough for students to demonstrate that they can select a coherent set of articles and write about them intelligently. Because students' knowledge of the subject area is limited, they often have trouble selecting a coherent set of readings. In effect, their topic is too broad, so that their readings, other than being relevant to a broad issue, have little to do with one another and will not provide a sound basis for an interesting review. I have found it useful to encourage or require students to bring in the titles and abstracts of the articles they intend to use in order to receive the instructor's

judgment regarding the articles' likely coherence. Such preliminary checks also can serve to identify readings that seem likely to be too complex for the student to understand reasonably.

The review paper itself will involve summaries and comprehension of the readings, but it also requires students to describe relations among the readings and draw inferences to arrive at tentative conclusions. Drawing inferences and relating the readings to a more general theme is an aspect often missing from students' review papers. Some papers resemble a kind of grocery list—a series of paragraph summaries with no connection drawn between paragraphs, and conclusions representing a short-list repetition of what was found in the paragraphs. Some of the emphasis on relations can be provided in discussing students' article choices, but attention should also be directed toward what should be included in the paper. Constructing an outline of a paper improves the quality of writing (Kellogg, 1987).

Critiques can take several forms, but I have in mind here an argumentative essay on a controversial topic. This kind of writing is exemplified by letters to the editor in the popular press and by commentaries on published articles in a variety of professional journals. There is some target article to which one writes a response. Compared to the three paper types discussed earlier, students tend to find critiques to be daunting, even a bit mystifying. Here are two reasons for such reactions. First, students are inclined to view their tasks as requiring comprehension or acquisition and reproduction (as critics have suggested, this orientation might be favored by instructors). The students' goal is to show that they have learned what has been assigned. Doing so is quite different from assessing the merits of what one has read or arguing for a point of view. The intellectual task of assessment and argument is unfamiliar to them. In addition, there is a perceived status difference between student and the professional author of an actually published article that could be intimidating. A second reason is that a critique has little identifiable form. Book reports, research reports, and literature reviews are not only more familiar but also have fairly obvious general forms. But what does a commentary look like? In assigning critiques, I have found it essential to provide students with a number of sample commentaries and to discuss the examples so that students can gain an idea of the various ways in which critiques can be fashioned. Because of the analytic nature of critiques, these papers reflect students' relevant knowledge base and reasoning abilities.

## SETTING THE ASSIGNMENT

It seems inevitable that writing assignments will be ill-defined to some extent. It is very difficult to anticipate all of the questions that students might have (whether they will or will not ask them). Nonetheless, it is to the instructor's advantage as well as the students' for the assignment to be described in some detail so that misinterpretations of the assignment as well as questions seeking clarification might be minimized. Among the main descriptors of a writing assignment are these:

> The purpose of the assignment; what is most important about the assignment
> What is to be included in the paper (sections, topics)
> The format and style to be followed
> The minimum number and type of required references
> The minimum or maximum number of pages
> Opportunities or requirements for preliminary review
> How the paper will be graded; opportunities or requirements for revision

Figures 7-1 and 7-2 present sample descriptions of writing assignments. These are offered, not as ideal types, but rather as reasonable descriptions that were developed over successive writing assignments.

*Paper Limits.* Instructors frequently require minimal lengths for students' papers, presumably to indicate the importance of the paper and the amount of work that should go into it. Here I want to emphasize setting maximum limits for student papers. Students tend to employ a disorganized writing strategy in which they include everything they can think of that is related to the topic and hope that the reader, namely the instructor, will grasp the good aspects of what they have written and give them credit for having included them. By imposing maximum length limits on a paper, students must think more carefully about the topic and about what they're going to include in their papers. Length limits require writers to be efficient—to say what needs to be said and avoid unnecessary embellishments.

Writers do not like limitations on how much they can say. Even professional writers know that to meet relatively strict length limitations requires considerable work. By placing a reasonable length limit on students' papers, instructors will help students to improve both their thinking and their writing processes.

## FEEDBACK, GRADING, AND REVISING

Most commonly, if student papers are required, they are submitted toward the end of the term and receive overall grades and perhaps some comments. Grading written assignments is notoriously unreliable, both across graders and within a grader over time. It is time-consuming for instructors to provide extended comments on students' papers. The fact that the students are seldom required to or have the opportunity to revise their papers is unfortunate because, with reasonable feedback on first drafts, revising their papers will both improve their writing skills and their understanding of the material they are writing about. Ideally, an instructor would have a meaningful feedback system that could be used to provide guidance to students that would help them revise their first drafts of papers and that would guide the instructor when determining grades for final versions of papers.

This paper focuses on summarizing research articles and relating them to one another. Your paper will be based on three research articles in psychological journals: one (target) article that you must choose from the list given below, plus two additional articles that are related to the target article.

Choose one of these two target articles:

:    xxxxxx

Copies of the target articles are available at the reserve desk in the library.

Selecting Two Additional Articles

1. The task is to select two articles that are meaningfully related to the target article, so that the three articles form a cohesive set.
2. Each article you select must have a publication date that is later than the target article. For example, if you choose the xxx target article (published in 1984), your other two articles must have been published in 1985, or later.
3. Each article must be a research report in a professional psychological journal. If you are not sure that an article you have found meets this criterion, ask the instructor. You will be told if any articles seem to be inappropriate for this assignment and get suggestions for finding usable articles.

Rules for Preparing and Submitting Drafts and Final Papers

1. All rules described in the course syllabus apply.
2. Your paper must contain (a) an introduction in which you describe the theme of your review, (b) a summary of each of the three articles, and (c) a discussion section in which you explain the relations among the articles and what they collectively tell us about the topic.
3. The maximum allowable length of the text of your paper is five pages. Papers exceeding this limit will be rejected; if drafts, without comment, if final versions, with zero points.
4. You must attach, to the end of your paper, copies of the first page of your two additional articles (and the abstract or summary, if it is not on the first page).

Grading criteria are described on the reverse side of this page.

**Figure 7-1    Instructions for the Literature Review Paper**

This paper focuses on evaluating the argument or thesis presented in a psychological article of a type usually called secondary sources. That is, the target article is not a report of original research; rather, it is a (possibly selective) literature review in which the author presents a specific viewpoint on a psychological topic. Your task is to prepare a commentary on a target article. Although your paper must summarize the target article to some degree, the emphasis should be on analyzing and critically evaluating the content of the target article.

Choose one of these two target articles:

:    xxxxxx

Copies of the target articles are available at the reserve desk in the library.

General Suggestions

1. It is crucial that you thoroughly understand the target article. Gaining that understanding may require additional reading. Beyond comprehension, it is important to carefully scrutinize the argument presented in the target.
2. A commentator is not required to clearly disagree with the target's author. You may agree, embellish, or supplement the author's argument, just as you may disagree or offer an alternative view of the topic. You may have a mixed reaction, in which case be sure to specify the strengths of your agreements and disagreements.
3. The target author's argument can be evaluated from any of several perspectives: completeness of the literature review, interpretation of cited results, logical consistency of the several steps in the argument, implications, and more.
4. It is alright to introduce additional literature. Perhaps the target author missed a key reference—perhaps a later publication brings a new perspective to the argument. However, you are not required to add any references for this paper; focus on analysis of the quality of the argument made by the target author.

Rules for Preparing and Submitting Drafts and Final Papers

1. All rules described in the course syllabus apply.
2. Maximum allowable length of your paper is five pages of text. Papers exceeding this limit will be rejected; drafts, without comment, final versions, with zero points.
3. There should be no abstract for your paper.
4. You must attach to the end of your draft and final paper, copies of the first page (and abstract, if on another page) of any articles you add to your paper.

Grading criteria are described on the reverse side of this page.

**Figure 7-2    Instructions for the Critical Analysis Paper**

A scheme that we have found useful makes use of a set of rating scales for both feedback and grading. Because students receive, in effect, a set of grades, the feedback they receive is more specific than overall grades and can direct them toward aspects of the papers that are strong as well as those that are weak and need improvement. Some rating scales are obviously specific to the particular paper being written, whereas others refer more generally to characteristics of the students' writing. In Figures 7-3 and 7-4, the point values assigned to different ratings and rating scales are idiosyncratic to the instructor. They merely illustrate how such a system might be implemented. When using rating scales to evaluate student papers, graders have their attention directed toward relatively specific aspects of the papers, which facilitates grading by a providing a set of easier-to-answer questions compared to an overall assessment. Because evaluation of a section of the paper, for example, the introduction, is likely to be more reliable than an overall assessment of the entire paper, rating scales can make paper grading more reliable. Because each student receives multiple ratings on a paper, there is at least some moderately specific feedback. If the scales are used to provide feedback on first drafts, students can then use the initial ratings to direct their efforts at revising their papers. Any written comments on the papers add feedback but are not required to bear the full feedback burden.

*Revising.* In addition to giving students useful feedback about their drafts of papers, instructors will find it helpful to instruct students directly on the best ways to revise papers. Novice writers such as students have been found to revise papers differently, compared to expert writers. Experts focus first on global problems that might exist in a paper—they attack the larger issues of revising and only later address details. Novices tend to focus on details (Hayes & Flower, 1986). Therefore, feedback to students should guide them toward addressing more global aspects of their papers.

There are two kinds of difficulties that students might face in trying to improve a paper. First, those whose writing skills are not well developed can have difficulty in identifying weaknesses in a paper, especially one of their own. Feedback provided by instructors or other paper evaluators can help students see weaknesses. The second difficulty is that, even with specific feedback, such that some weakness is identified, students might not know how to correct the weakness and improve the paper. We have found it helpful both to show students examples of well-written papers and to have students practice evaluating papers and receive feedback about their evaluations (Dominowski, Dallob, & Penningroth, 1994). Exercises were structured as follows: First, students were shown an example of a good (part of a) paper together with comments indicating what was good about that paper; any weaknesses were also discussed. Then, students were given two sample papers chosen to be relatively good and relatively weak. The students were asked to evaluate these papers and to indicate which was better and which was worse. After doing so, students then received the evaluations of the sample papers

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Name_____ | Grader_____ | |
| | Draft__ Final__ | |
| TITLE PAGE | −2 OR | 0 |
| | INCORRECT | CORRECT FORM |

| LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH |
|---|---|---|

OVERALL CLARITY OF INTRODUCTION
1    2    3    4    5

ACCURACY AND CLARITY OF ARTICLE SUMMARIES
1    2    3    4    5

DEGREE TO WHICH THE REFERENCES ARE COORDINATED/RELATED
1    2    3    4    5

CLARITY AND QUALITY OF CONCLUSIONS OFFERED
1    2    3    4    5

DEGREE TO WHICH INDIVIDUAL SENTENCES ARE UNDERSTANDABLE
1    2    3    4    5

DEGREE TO WHICH RELATIONS AMONG SENTENCES (PARAGRAPHS) ARE UNDERSTANDABLE
1    2    3    4    5

EFFECTIVENESS OF ORGANIZATION (SEQUENCE) OF THE SENTENCES AND PARAGRAPHS WITHIN THE PAPER
1    2    3    4    5

DEGREE TO WHICH EACH SENTENCE CONTRIBUTES TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC (GLOBAL COHERENCE)
1    2    3    4    5

PRECISENESS OF WORDING/ABSENCE OF AMBIGUITY
1    2    3    4    5

EXTENT TO WHICH REQUIRED STYLE IS FOLLOWED *NOTE SCORING

−1    0    1    2    3

BASIC GRAMMAR/SPELLING/PUNCTUATION/PARAGRAPHING *NOTE SCORING
−2    −1    0    1    2
MAXIMUM POINTS=50

**Figure 7-3  Grading Key for Essay**

Name_____    Grader_____

| TITLE PAGE | −2 | 0 | +2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bonus | WRONG-FORMAT | CORRECT | EXCELLENT |

| LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH |
|---|---|---|

DEGREE TO WHICH PAPER SHOWS UNDERSTANDING OF TARGET ARTICLE

1          2          3          4          5

ACCURACY AND FAIRNESS OF REPRESENTATION OF TARGET ARTICLE

1          2          3          4          5

LOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEAS EXPRESSED

1          2          3          4          5

DEGREE TO WHICH IDEAS WERE ELABORATED WHEN NEEDED

1          2          3          4          5

PERSUASIVENESS/EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMENTARY

1          2          3          4          5

DEGREE TO WHICH INDIVIDUAL SENTENCES ARE UNDERSTANDABLE

1          2          3          4          5

DEGREE TO WHICH RELATIONS AMONG SENTENCES (PARAGRAPHS) ARE UNDERSTANDABLE

1          2          3          4          5

PRECISENESS OF WORDING; ABSENCE OF AMBIGUITY

1          2          3          4          5

GLOBAL COHERENCE: EXTENT TO WHICH EACH SENTENCE CONTRIBUTES TO THE THEME

1          2          3          4          5

EXTENT TO WHICH REQUIRED STYLE IS FOLLOWED **NOTE SCORING

−1          0          1          2          3

BASIC GRAMMAR/SPELLING/PUNCTUATION/PARAGRAPHING **NOTE SCORING

−2          −1          0          1          2

MAXIMUM POINTS=50

**Figure 7-4    Scoring Key for Commentary**

that were made by the graders. The essential idea was to show students examples of well-written papers and to help them develop their own paper-evaluating skills. Students' revisions of their papers showed substantial improvement in writing quality.

## PLAGIARISM

The obvious purpose of writing assignments is to help students demonstrate that they have completed the assignment, as well as to provide students with the opportunity to improve their writing skills. If students do not do the work, the intended purpose is thwarted. Plagiarism is offering another's thoughts and writing as one's own, with no identification of the original source. Concern over plagiarism has frequently been expressed (Standing & Gorassini, 1986); the question facing instructors is what, if anything, might be done to minimize its occurrence. Plagiarism can occur in different ways. Complete papers can be purchased from commercial establishments or downloaded from the Internet. Text from published material can be incorporated verbatim or near-verbatim into a student's paper. One student can copy another's work. Because plagiarism can take different forms, efforts to combat it also vary.

To reduce the chances of students using already existing papers, instructors can take steps to make their papers unique to their courses. Rather than requesting a general paper on some generally available source, an instructor can include in the assignment directions that require students to refer specifically to course material in writing their papers. For courses that are taught repeatedly, instructors who change their writing assignments from one offering to the next limit opportunities to use existing papers.

Perhaps the most difficult form of plagiarism to deal with exists when students copy text from published sources without proper citation. The first problem is that the plagiarism might be unintentional! Students cannot copy another's work, word for word, without being aware of doing so; although it seems unlikely that college students would be unaware of the requirement to use quotation marks in such cases, a brief reminder from the instructor would clarify proper usage. More troublesome is superficial modification of another's words, versus proper paraphrasing of the ideas contained in the original text. Roig (1997) found that undergraduate students, given an original text and various rewritten versions of it, made the mistake of judging plagiarized (superficially modified) versions as properly paraphrased. In addition, students might not know how to properly cite an author when they do use their own words to paraphrase an author's ideas. For example, if a student writes a paragraph summarizing another's innovative analysis of some issue but merely includes the other's paper in a reference list, the student has not cited properly the source of the ideas in that paragraph. The solution to problems of misunderstanding is prevention—a brief but

enlightening lecture on issues of plagiarism that clearly spells out proper methods of citation.

The second general problem concerns detection and verification of plagiarism from published sources. In some cases, the stylistic differences between the published material and a student's own writing might be noticeable enough that one's suspicions are aroused. Nonetheless, tracking down the source of the imported material will be at least time-consuming and might be impossible. How does the instructor determine whether a student has actually written some part of the paper or copied it from a published source? The instructor might interview the student, asking questions about various parts of the paper in an attempt to assess the student's understanding of the written material. Another proposed technique is to employ what is called a cloze test. This procedure calls for deleting, say, every fifth word from a prose passage. The modified passage, with blanks (which should be the same size) where the deleted words used be, is then given to a person with the task of filling in the missing words. Cloze tests have been used simply to determine how predictable a prose passage might be. In the present context, the underlying assumption is that a person will be better able to fill in the blanks for a passage he or she has written, compared to the success rate for a passage written by someone else. Research using this procedure (Standing & Gorassini, 1986) has shown that students tend to score higher (about 85%) in filling in passages they have written compared to completing passages written by another (about 60%). However, there is variability in scores such that a relatively low score could be obtained even when completing one's own prose if there has been some delay between creating the passage and filling in the blanks. A very high score, on the other hand, is likely to be a good indication that the student has written the passage.

Even if very accurate plagiarism assessment techniques were available, students might not agree to cooperate with such post-hoc procedures, and refusal is not proof of guilt (Standing & Gorassini, 1986). If an instructor included on the course syllabus a statement to the effect that the instructor reserved the right to conduct plagiarism assessments before accepting papers, perhaps the procedure would be seen as justified. Such an announcement might also have a deterrent effect.

One somewhat cumbersome but effective technique for deterring plagiarism is to require students to append copies of their cited references to submitted papers. Possession of the sources allows a grader to compare a student's paper to cited text, whether to check for possible plagiarism or for the quality of the student's description and use of the cited material. Examining copies of potentially interesting articles can help instructors select materials for subsequent offerings of a course. If the number of references per paper is more than a few, this procedure will be wasteful and infeasible. It also is ineffective for detecting when students use a source that they do not cite in their papers. Nonetheless, for shorter papers, the requirement to append copies of cited articles can be useful.

## SUMMARY

Writing assignments allow students to consider their thoughts on a topic, and improving writing skills improves thinking. Expressive writing assignments are short and ask students to react to course material; the goal is to help students to understand a topic, and such assignments are often not graded. Persuasive writing assignments such as term papers, lab reports, and critiques require students to carefully formulate and organize their thoughts to produce coherent papers. Clear instructions regarding writing assignments, including information about how papers will be evaluated, should be provided in handouts. Writing assignments are most beneficial when students receive feedback on papers and submit revisions. Written comments and ratings on multiple scales dealing with different aspects of a paper provide guidance for revising. Students also need exposure to examples of good writing to improve their papers. Steps to reduce plagiarism include class presentations on plagiarism, constructing assignments so that they are course-specific, and requiring students to submit copies of relevant parts of reference materials.