

# Designing Writing Assignments for Multilingual Students

- **Give students enough time to complete formal writing assignments.** Distributing major assignments well in advance will give multilingual (and all) students more time to ask questions, seek help, and complete the task successfully.
- **Prioritize the learning goals for the assignment.** Hafernik et al. (2012) recommend designing assignments that promote critical thinking, asking students to do more than display their knowledge of the “right” answer. Engaging the minds of students in meaningful, authentic tasks can accelerate learning. State your learning goals and what constitutes successful performance in guidelines, rubrics and evaluation criteria.
- **Break assignment into stages and incorporate feedback loops.** Written projects may include multiple steps such as a proposal, progress report, outline, annotated bibliography, section draft, full draft, presentation, etc. At different stages, student may receive feedback from peers or the instructor to help identify areas for improvement while there is still time to make changes.
- **Make available models or samples of completed work.** Particularly when students are working in unfamiliar genres, models can help students visualize the goals of the assignment. If there is a concern about students imitating samples, teachers may share only excerpts or samples of varying quality. “Teachers should consider glossing sample papers with comments that point to the specific aspects of the paper that make it well written” (NCTE ELL Task Force).
- **Provide targeted feedback.** Feedback should be aligned with the learning goals of the assignment. Hafenik et al. suggest “keeping in mind the priority of global concerns, especially *clarity* and *comprehensibility*.” If there are multiple grammar and usage mistakes, instructors may highlight errors that interfere with comprehension and then flag any patterns of error. The NCTE ELL Task Force suggests offering comments on strengths as well, so students know where they are meeting expectations.
- **Have students complete peer evaluations and self-evaluations.** Peers, in or out of class, can provide useful feedback to writers, particularly if instructors provide evaluation forms or reader response questions. Having students articulate what they perceive as strengths and weaknesses in their own writing encourages good writing habits.
- **Clarify expectations regarding plagiarism and textual borrowing.** NCTE’s ELL Task Force offers this advice: “Teachers should consider talking openly about citation and plagiarism in class, exploring the cultural values that are implicit in the rules of plagiarism and textual borrowing, and noting that not all cultures ascribe to the same rules and guidelines.”
- **Provide informal writing opportunities.** Writing-to-learn assignments such as personal reflections, minute papers, journals, learning logs, blog posts, reaction papers, mind maps, discussion starters, etc. give students opportunities to practice many language and cognitive skills they need for more formal assignments. Because informal assignments are generally not weighted heavily in grades, students may feel more comfortable testing ideas and developing their literacy skills. The ELL Task Force recommends “providing frequent meaningful opportunities for students to generate their own texts.”

- **Refer students to campus and online resources.** Multilingual students, as all students, can benefit from more individualized instruction such as that offered by tutors in the writing center. Students should know that while tutors can help them improve their writing, they cannot “fix” or copy-edit papers for them. Online resources such as those offered for ESL students by Purdue’s Online Writing Lab can be recommended for self-directed study.
- **Advise students to concentrate on higher-order concerns (HOCs) before addressing middle- and lower-order concerns (MOCs and LOCs).** HOCs include “global” issues such as audience, purpose, focus, organization, argument, etc. MOCs (paragraph development, transitions, tone and word choice) and LOCs (sentence structure, punctuation, spelling and mechanics) are “local” issues, generally requiring attention later in the writing process.
- **Acknowledge “English with an accent.”** Horner et al. (2011) make a case that “all speakers of English speak many variations of English, every one of them accented, and all of them subject to change as they intermingle with other varieties of English and other languages” (p. 304). While formal written language may exhibit more standard features than spoken language, some variation is likely.
- **Consider what background knowledge is necessary to complete the assignment.** Some assignments assume or make reference to cultural traditions, historical events, etc. that might be unfamiliar to some ELL students. Providing supplementary background readings or resources can improve the cultural literacy of all students.
- **Help students understand the conventions of writing in your discipline.** Relatively new to our fields, many students find academic, scholarly and professional writing challenging, so it is not surprising that multilingual students may also struggle. Consider discussing, and perhaps modeling, how experts read and write in your field.
- **Establish a collaborative, interactive environment for learning.** Teachers can support learning for multilingual students by “providing a nurturing environment for writing,” “introducing cooperative, collaborative writing activities which promote discussion,” and “encouraging contributions from all students, and promoting peer interaction to support learning” (ELL Task Force).
- **Encourage global and diverse perspectives.** Writing assignments often focus on topics, issues and problems that are best examined from multiple perspectives. If provided the opportunity, multilingual students may have much to contribute to class conversations, written or otherwise, on such topics.

#### References

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- Hafernik, J. J., & Wiant, F. M. (2012). *Integrating multilingual students into college classrooms: Practical advice for faculty*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Horner, B., Lu, M.-Z., Royster, J. J., & Trimbur, J. (January 01, 2011). Language Difference in Writing--Toward a Translingual Approach. *College English*, 73, 3, 303-321.
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