Better Student Essays through Staging and Scaffolding Assignments
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Have you ever been excited by a particular writing assignment you’ve created but then were unpleasantly surprised and disappointed by the writing your students produced for that assignment?

Even when instructors are very thoughtful about how they create and present writing assignments, sometimes they are nonetheless disappointed by the writing their students produce. Instructors might have clearly identified and laudable goals. Their expectations might be reasonable and just. But still, they receive essays that make them gasp or giggle—essays that make many of the instructors we talk to shake their heads and say, “Students can’t write.”

Our experiences with students in the Writing Center, Teaching Resource Center workshops, and the Writing Program have taught us that most U.Va. students are able to write certain sorts of documents, personal narratives, for example; they just don’t know how to write the kinds of texts they are asked to produce in many of their classes. Students who are new to a field, and especially students who are new to college, struggle with their writing not so much because they lack skills, but because they lack knowledge:

- **Novice students don’t know the field.** They are only beginning to learn general information about the field and have not yet learned what is understood as common knowledge, what is unknown, and how information and ideas are typically structured and presented in that field.

- **Novice students have little or no acquaintance with the forms of discourse they are asked to produce.** They don’t know what an academic essay in a particular field looks or sounds like; they don’t know how it is typically organized; they don’t know what counts as evidence or how to deploy the evidence they do recognize.

- **Novice students don’t know much about their readers.** In many cases, their instructor is the only person they know who is interested in the questions and problems addressed in the course. As a result, novice writers often write for an audience that they perceive as knowing more than they do. This is a difficult scenario even for practiced writer, and one that is likely to change the rhetorical register of their texts.

As students focus on understanding and mastering new information, ideas, and questions, and when they grapple with difficult concepts and high-order critical thinking tasks (such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), their writing often suffers at the sentence level. Their prose becomes contorted, unwieldy, simplistic, or error ridden.

We can design writing assignments that alleviate these difficulties by staging assignments and by providing scaffolding:

**Staging Assignments.** Rather than ask students to produce complete, polished documents all in one step, break down essays and research papers into a series of shorter, discrete writing tasks that slowly build in cognitive complexity: for example, begin with tasks that increase knowledge and comprehension; then tasks that ask students to apply principles and theories or to analyze information or arguments; move to tasks that have students synthesize and then evaluate information and arguments. You, finally, might assign some of the following tasks to stage a research paper:

- **Pre-research:**
  - Describe the topic and known facts / information.
  - List questions based on known information.

- **During research**
  - Summarize individual sources and texts.

- **Post-research**
  - Lists similarities / differences between two or more authors’ views.
  - Categorize information or authors’ positions.
  - Write briefings or research summaries synthesizing several sources.

**Developing an Argument**
• Write a paragraph posing the question to be answered or problem to be solved and explaining why this is an important question or problem.
• List reasons supporting a claim / lists of evidence supporting a reason.
• Draft research paper.

Providing Scaffolding for Assignments. Give students opportunities to practice the skills you teach as you teach them. You can design assignments that target a particular skill by giving them some of the elements they need to perform other skills:
• Give students an explicit scenario within which they are asked to write.
• Give students a claim (or choice of claims) to make.
• Give students a problem or question to answer.
• Give students off-the-shelf resources to use (class readings as sources for information, lists of relevant information).
• Have groups of students share resources by pooling information or research summaries.

By staging and scaffolding assignments, you educate your students in the forms and expectations of writing in your academic discipline, give yourself manageable pieces of writing to comment on and/or grade, and enable students to work toward writing a strong final paper.