Designing “Meaning-Constructing” Writing Prompts
GIVE YOUR STUDENTS A “RAFT” … AND A “TIP”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role (or purpose)</th>
<th>Task as</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Inquiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format (or genre)</td>
<td>Problem*</td>
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<td>Task</td>
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*The instructor can specify the problem, give students choices among several problems, or ask students to formulate their own problem.

Note on Audience: When specifying an audience in an assignment, the instructor also needs to help students visualize the audience’s initial stance toward the writer’s subject. The instructor’s goal is to move students toward a thesis with tension—what Graff and Birkenstein call the “They say/I say” move: “Many people think X, but I am going to argue Y” or “Before reading my paper my reader will think X. After reading my paper, my reader will think Y.” The writer’s goal is to change in some way the reader’s initial stance or view.

- Your classmate is confused about X. Send him or her an email that ...
- Address your paper to classmates whose solution to the problem is different from yours.
- Scholars are divided about X. Write a formal academic paper presenting your position on this disciplinary problem. Imagine presenting the paper at an undergraduate research conference where listeners are apt to be skeptical of your thesis.
- You are a research assistant to Senator Smith who needs to decide X. Write a policy brief that ...

What’s at Stake in Providing a RAFT and a TIP?

By providing both a RAFT and a TIP, instructors encourage writers to develop transferable skills. They must think both about a subject matter problem and about rhetorical problems concerning purpose, audience, and genre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Critically about a Subject-Matter Problem</th>
<th>Thinking Rhetorically about Purpose, Audience, and Genre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• How am I going to answer this question? What’s at stake?</td>
<td>• Who is my audience for this paper?</td>
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<td>• What have others said about this problem? What point of view will I “push against”?</td>
<td>• How much does my audience already know about or care about this problem? How much background do they need? How can I motivate them?</td>
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<td>• What data/evidence bears on this problem? What is known and not known?</td>
<td>• What change do I want to bring about in my audience’s thinking, behavior, or view of my topic?</td>
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<td>• What research do I need to do?</td>
<td>• What are the features and constraints of the genre I am writing in?</td>
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<td>• What assumptions, values, beliefs, or theories are at stake here?</td>
<td>• What style and level of language should I use? How familiar is my audience with the jargon or specialized terms of my field?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What are the consequences of my proposed solution? What is lost or gained?</td>
<td>• How should I design the document (use of headings, white space, manuscript form, etc.)?</td>
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THINKING RHETORICALLY ABOUT ASSIGNMENT DESIGN:
FIVE VARIATIONS ON THE SAME ASSIGNMENT

Suppose that you are a nursing professor with two goals for a research assignment: (1) You want to
deepen students' thinking about controversies in alternative medicine and (2) you want to create a writing
assignment that will help your students learn to read the professional literature with sophistication and to
do the kind of critical thinking, inquiry, analysis, and problem-solving required of nurses. You decide to
have your students investigate the controversy over therapeutic touch (TT), a form of alternative medicine
in which the healer is said to effect therapeutic changes in the patient's energy field by moving his or her
hands slightly above the patient's body. Consider the following five assignment options and the
discussion questions that follow:

Assignment Option 1
Write an 8-10 page research paper on therapeutic touch. Follow APA conventions for documentation.

Assignment Option 2
You are a staff nurse at a large urban hospital. Recently the hospital became embroiled in a major controversy when
several nurses were discovered to be practicing "therapeutic touch" (TT) on patients without the permission or
knowledge of their supervisors or of attending physicians. The hospital governing board reprimanded the nurses and
issued a general statement forbidding the practice of TT, which they called "non-scientific quackery." Research the
professional literature on TT looking especially for evidence-based studies. Then write a 4-5 page argument,
addressed to the hospital governing board, supporting or attacking the board's decision to forbid the practice of TT.
Support your position with reasons and evidence based on the professional literature.

Assignment Option 3
Assume that you and several colleagues seek grant funding to do a controlled research study on the efficacy of TT
for reducing anxiety and pain in surgery patients. Research the current professional literature on TT and then write
the "review of the literature" section of your grant proposal.

Assignment Option 4
Do a literature search to find several empirical studies of TT. Choose one of these studies for this 1-2 page paper.
Write a critical review of your selected article in which you (1) summarize the purpose, method, and results of the
study [in your own words—don't copy the abstract] and (2) write a critical review of the article in which you
analyze the extent to which it provides or doesn't provide a scientific basis for regarding TT as evidence-based
medicine.

Assignment Option 5
Should schools of nursing and major nursing organizations give their imprimatur to TT? In some quarters, nurses
are being ridiculed for their attraction to "new age mysticism." In other quarters, nurses are praised for their
openness to modalities of healing other than western science. For this assignment write an 8-10 page exploratory
research paper that describes chronologically your own search for a personal answer to this question. The paper
should start with a reflection on where you stood on this issue and why before you began your research. (Being
confused or uncertain is OK.) Then write a first-person, reflective narrative of your thinking process as you
investigated your question by researching the professional literature, talking with classmates, and drawing on your
own personal experiences, memories, and observations. Your narrative should include a summary of at least three
professional articles, followed by your own intellectual wrestling with that article's ideas. By the end of your
essay, sum up how your ideas evolved during your process of research and reflection. You will be rewarded for the
quality of your exploration and thinking processes. In other words, your goal is not to take a stand on this issue, but
to report on your process of wrestling with it.

Discussion Questions
1. What differences in thinking processes are apt to be encouraged by each option?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?
3. Which assignment or sequence of assignments would you choose were you the nursing
   professor?