

Authentic Writing Assignments

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Definition of an authentic assignment

Authentic assignments ask students to perform the intellectual work—at an apprentice level—that people in your field perform. They place students in a real or realistic situation where the students must use the knowledge or skills they are learning in your course to help someone else (not you).

Why authenticity matters

- Can increase student motivation by showing the practical uses of what they are studying.
- Can engage students in intellectually challenging work that extends the value of their courses.
- Can simplify grading because instructors can judge students' work from the perspective of the readers (who are not the professor) in scenarios the instructors created.

How to create an authentic assignment

Embed a traditional assignment in a story in which the students use their knowledge or skills of your field to help another person. The stories have seven elements.

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| 1. What you want the students to learn to do | The knowledge or ability you want your students to learn. |
| 2. Students' role | The role the student will play (e.g., friend, specialist addressing a non-specialist audience, specialist addressing a specialist audience). |
| 3. Real-world audience | The person who asks for the students' assistance. Can be future employer or client, friend, citizens who want to understand something in your field to decide how to address a community, national, or international issue. |
| 4. Problem or question | The problem or question that causes someone else to be interested in the topic the students will address. |
| 5. Reason the audience wants or needs students' help | This is the key to story. It should engage the students' interest. |
| 6. How the audience will USE the students' communication | The specific tasks the audience will perform with the help of the communication. |
| 7. Communication | The item the students will provide to the person who asked for their help. |

Three examples

These examples suggest the varieties of stories you can create, depending on the nature of your field, goals of your course, students' interests, level of their expertise, and other factors.

Story Elements	Macroeconomics	Computer Science	Feminist Theory
What you want the students to learn to do	How to apply economic theory to a current economic policy	How to use System Requirements Reports to evaluate program functionality	How to interpret new works of literature using feminist theory
Students' role	Student	Professional	Disciplinary specialist
Person(s) who want help	Friend	Project manager	Literary scholars
Problem or question	Are EU austerity requirements likely to help Spain and Greece recover economically?	What needs to be done to complete this program?	Is feminist theory useful in interpreting new works?
Reason the audience wants students' help	Settle an argument with a boyfriend	Perform his or her job responsibilities	Intellectual interest in the topic
How the audience will USE the students' communication	Decide what to say to boyfriend	Plan work to be done on the program	Decide whether the students' analysis is persuasive
Communication	Email	Workplace report	Scholarly article

Sample assignments

These are the assignments whose elements are described above.

Helping a friend [Macroeconomics. Student learning outcome: to apply economic theory to a current economic policy.] You have received an email from a friend at another school who says that she is having an argument with her boyfriend about the austerity measures that the European Union has required Spain and Greece to take before lending them money needed to avoid national bankruptcy. Her boyfriend, a sociologist, believes that, for all the hardship they cause for ordinary people, these measures will not revive the national economies. An engineer, your friend believes that without these measures, the loans from the European Union will be insufficient to revive the economies, resulting in even greater hardship. Knowing that you are taking a macroeconomics course, she asks you give her the reasons she can use to persuade him that she is correct or else to explain why he is right.

Performing professional work on the Job [Computer Science. Student learning outcome: to use System Requirements Reports to evaluate program functionality.] You work for a software company that recently purchased another company that had several programs in development but not completed. Your manager has asked you to test the program against the System Requirements Report to identify and prioritize the work that must be performed for the program to be ready for delivery. Your manager will use your report to develop a plan for completing the work that includes the tasks to be performed, the staff to be assignment to the project, and the schedule for completion. [Students are given the program code and System Requirements Report.]

Entering a disciplinary conversation [Advanced English literature. Student learning outcome: to interpret new works of literature using feminist theory.] A scholar has issued a call for submissions for a book of original essays exploring the question of whether feminist theory still provides a powerful way of interpreting contemporary literature, so much of which is written by authors who are thoroughly educated in its tenets. He has invited you to prepare an essay on the application of feminist theory to interpreting stories published within the last two years in the *New Yorker*.

Your authentic assignment

	Your Story Elements
Name and number of your course	
What you want the students to learn to do through this assignment	
Students' role	
Person(s) who want students' help	
Problem or question	
Why audience wants students' help	
How the audience will USE the students' communication	
Communication	

Final thought

Depending on the nature of your assignment, you may have an opportunity to add to the students' knowledge and abilities by addressing topics you otherwise might not have. For instance, in the computer science example, you might teach students how to use tables effectively to present information. In the English literature example, you might teach students the conventions of the particular genre of literary essay you would like them to use.