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**To:** [TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU](mailto:TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU)  
**Subject:** Teaching Toolbox: What Are We Actually Assigning?  
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## What Are We Actually Assigning?

By Emily O. Gravett

Welcome back! I hope the start of your spring semester has gone well.

A few years back, I read a great book called [Assignments across the Curriculum](#) (2014), in which author Dan Melzer summarizes the results of a large-scale survey of 2,101 college writing assignments across 400 courses at 100 institutions. Among other important findings, his data confirm: there is no stable or inherent meaning for academic genres, such as “research paper,” “journal,” or “lab report.” What one discipline, one course, or even one instructor means by these types of student work may differ dramatically from the next. Melzer’s data imply that we shouldn’t take these genres for granted—or assume they are easily understandable—when crafting assignments for, or communicating with, our students.

Melzer went on to reveal that the very language that we use to prompt students’ activities within these so-called ‘genres’—seemingly simple or self-explanatory verbs like “analyze” or “explain”—also differs across and among disciplines. He writes, for instance, that “in the sciences, analyzing usually means collecting, organizing, and assessing data.... ‘Analysis’ in the humanities requires students to respond to ideas in texts and works of art, consider historical contexts, and theorize and make generalizations” (65). Even within the humanities, we can easily imagine an English instructor might mean something very different by “analyze” than an art history instructor using the very same verb with her students. Words that can seem so obvious or intuitive in our own contexts are often understood quite differently (and yet still so naturally) by our colleagues in other contexts.

Melzer’s results seem to have several significant implications:

- First, and most basically, **we cannot assume that students will always know what we’re asking of them.** What students should do in response to what may seem (to us) like a simple direction, “write a research paper,” turns out to be not at all instinctual.
- Second, simply because students have had experience with a particular genre in the past doesn’t mean that experience will be transferable or applicable to other contexts. In fact, such **prior exposure might prove to be a barrier to students’ success**, as they may import into the new context what they had previously learned, which may not necessarily be relevant. If, based upon an assignment in one course, a student comes to believe that “research papers” are reports summarizing known data, then that student may be at a disadvantage in another course, in which “research paper” means an opportunity to offer an original contribution.
- Melzer’s research suggests that we would do well to **spend time helping our students understand what we’re asking them to do**, by defining our terms, providing models, disseminating annotated examples, delineating clear criteria, using grading rubrics, etc.

Because we cannot assume that our assignments (or their genres) speak for themselves, we need to be as transparent and explicit as possible. It may even be worth spending some time talking with our students, in class, about what they think a particular type of assignment entails, in an attempt to unearth any (mistaken) assumptions they might have, so that we can then help them understand how to go about doing things correctly in our specific context.

- Finally, but implicitly, *Assignments across the Curriculum* also makes the case for enhanced communication among instructors, within departments and even across disciplines. Given how much potential there is for confusion, it seems so important to **know what our colleagues are assigning and what they mean by those 'genres' when they do.**

The beginning of the year is a great time to think about our assignments and how clear they are for students!

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