Jim Burke is among the finest writing educators we have today. He keeps up with research, instruction, students, and society and mines them for ideas to try out, refine, and formulate as instructional principles and activities that support students' writing, thinking, and learning. *The Six Academic Writing Assignments* is a groundbreaking amalgam of his work with his own students and the efforts of so many teachers with whom he has worked. It is phenomenal. Read it!

—JUDITH A. LANGER, Vincent O'Leary Distinguished Research Professor, University at Albany

A new generation of high school teachers now write books as once only college professors did, and they write better ones—and with greater relevance to teaching—than most of those professors. To me Jim Burke is the leading figure in this emerging trend, and in this valuable new book he applies "the principles of design thinking" to writing assignments, "the secret operating systems of our classes," as he calls them, that, for better or worse, affect whether students "learn to write well for academic purposes."

—GERALD GRAFF, Professor of English and Education, University of Illinois at Chicago, and author of *They Say, I Say*

In this impressive book, Jim Burke offers a deep and thoughtful look at why we do what we do in designing academic writing assignments, inspiring us to be mindful of the mental moves we want our students to engage in and intentional in creating intellectual experiences to teach and transform them. At once theoretical and practical, this book is filled with a rich array of user-friendly, classroom-tested practices teachers can use to map out a yearlong writing journey for their students.

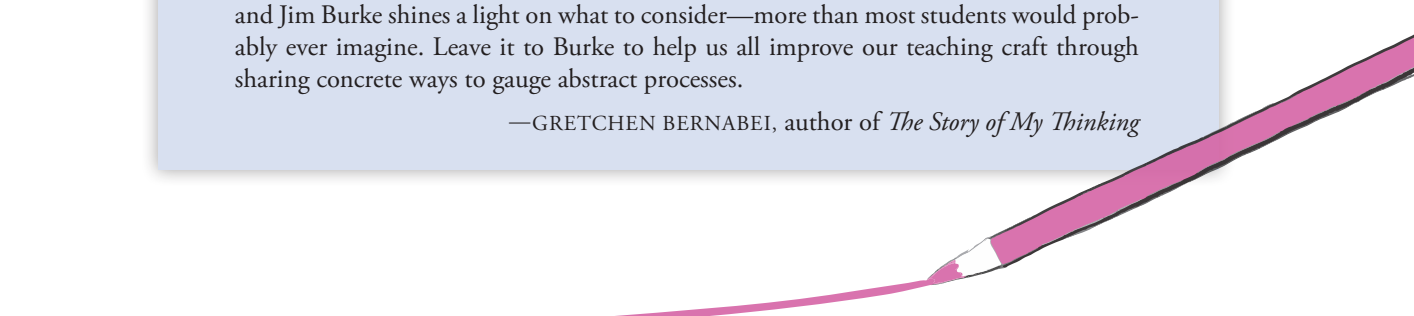
—CAROL BOOTH OLSON, Professor of Education, University of California, Irvine, and author of *The Reading-Writing Connection*

Using innovative tenets of design thinking, Burke deeply empathizes with students as they try to use the course material teachers design for them. This level of empathy allows him (and us) to focus more effectively on the actual learning *experiences* of students as they confront assignments. Rich with online resources, examples of real student work, and pages upon pages of ideas and problem-solving advice, *The Six Academic Writing Assignments* provides expert and sage guidance. In his friendly, wise, and inimitably readable voice, Burke encourages teachers of all subjects to better reflect on and improve the ways they direct and guide their own students as writers.

—KEN LINDBLOM, coauthor of *Making the Journey*, Fourth Edition, and former editor of NCTE's *English Journal*

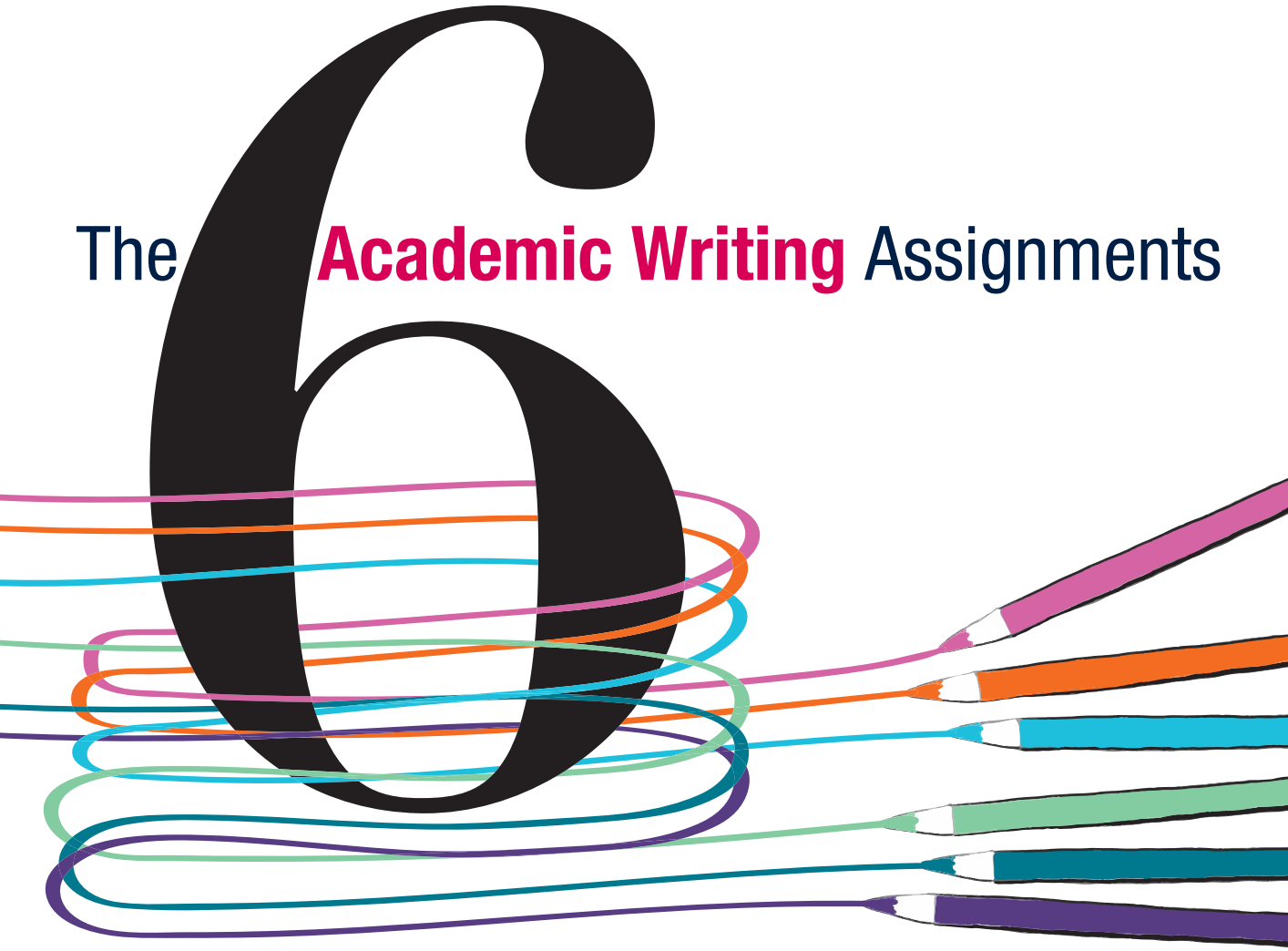
This book demystifies the complexities of what we ask students to write. Creating assignments for our students is one of the most important moves in our teaching repertoires, and Jim Burke shines a light on what to consider—more than most students would probably ever imagine. Leave it to Burke to help us all improve our teaching craft through sharing concrete ways to gauge abstract processes.

—GRETCHEN BERNABEI, author of *The Story of My Thinking*



JIM BURKE

The 6 Academic Writing Assignments



Designing the User's Journey

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Name: Burke, Jim, author.
Title: The six academic writing assignments : designing the user's journey / Jim Burke.
Description: Portsmouth, NH : Heinemann, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018020078 | ISBN 9780325050942
Subjects: LCSH: English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Secondary) | English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Higher) | Report writing—Study and teaching (Secondary) | Report writing—Study and teaching (Higher)
Classification: LCC LB1631 .B77385 2019 | DDC 428.0071/2—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018020078

Acquisitions Editors: Tom Newkirk and Sue Paro
Production Editor: Sean Moreau
Cover Designer: Monica Crigler
Interior Designer: Kim Arney
Typesetter: Kim Arney
Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
22 21 20 19 18 CGB 1 2 3 4 5

Ever grateful for my students and colleagues at Burlingame High School,
and for all that they have taught me these many years.

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***The Six Academic Writing Assignments* Online Resources**

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Excerpt from "Reading and Writing" by Bill Robinson. Unpublished manuscript, accessed May 15, 2016. PDF file.

Figure 4–11: Excerpts from *Academic Moves for College and Career Readiness, Grades 6–12: 15 Must-Have Skills Every Student Needs to Achieve* by Jim Burke and Barry Gilmore. Copyright © 2015 by Corwin. Reprinted by permission of SAGE.

Figure 5–1: AP* Research Course and Exam Description, Effective Fall 2017. Copyright © 2017 by the College Board. Reprinted by permission of the College Board. http://apcentral.collegeboard.com.

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Acknowledgments

This book about writing taught me more about writing, especially writing as a process, than any other book I have ever written. Over the course of five years, I wrote at least three different versions of this book, each time realizing what I had learned along the way and why that latest version was not the book I was trying to write. Fortunately, I had editors and others at Heinemann who demonstrated their faith in me, the book, and the writing process at every step. Specifically, Tobey Antao helped me get started and guided me through the early stages of my thinking. Eventually, Tom Newkirk joined the conversation and, along with Sue Paro, accompanied me through the remaining drafts, listening, recommending, and always helping me to hear the recurring ideas that I was often slow to notice.

When I began to wonder if I had forgotten how to write books or if I would ever finish this one, the generous leaders and cooler heads at Heinemann prevailed. Thus, deepest thanks to Patty Adams, Kim Arney, Cindy Black, Vicki Boyd, Kim Cahill, Eric Chalek, Monica Crigler, Michelle Flynn, Sarah Fournier, Lisa Fowler, Sean Moreau, Edie Davis Quinn, and Elizabeth Tripp. Though Heinemann's credo is "Dedicated to Teachers," the truth is that the company is just as dedicated to its writers, something I have come to understand and appreciate more and more over the twenty years I have worked with all the wonderful people there.

When I had ideas I needed to try out or early versions of the book I wanted to get a response to, the colleagues I have come to trust and value so much over the years when it comes to academic writing were always generous with their time and responses: Gretchen Barnebei, Kelly Gallagher, Carol Jago, Penny Kittle, Carol Booth Olson, Laura Robb, Michael Smith, and Jeff Wilhelm. Two people merit special mention, for reasons we should all understand: Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer. Over the five years during which I wrote this book, I returned constantly to their work, especially their last book together, *Writing Instruction That Works: Proven Methods for Middle and High School Classrooms* (2013). However, I have always been grateful for the friendship and mentorship both Judith and Arthur provided me from my earliest days as a writer. In one way or another, this book stands as a testimony to all that I have learned from their writings, our

conversations, and their example over the years. When I learned of Arthur's death in 2015, I could only think of his exemplary career as a scholar who had, from the moment I began to write, been willing to take me seriously and respond to my queries so thoughtfully in the mad scrum following their sessions at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual conference or over a nice dinner with him and Judith while visiting them in Albany.

During the five years I spent grappling with this book, my wife, Susan, was never anything but what she has been since the earliest days of my writing: supportive, helpful, and patient. Three summers in a row, each of which I devoted almost entirely to writing this book, culminated in me declaring, with great confidence each time, that I had finally finished the book—only to realize by the time I had sent it off to my editors that I had still not found the core of the ideas. During those same years, I taught at Burlingame High School, where I have worked now for over twenty-five years. There, teaching seniors year in and year out, trying to cope with the changes and challenges that greet us every new year, I have learned more than any one book can possibly hold; my students remain, as the dedication shows, my most important teachers, though the lessons I learn from them are perhaps more by accident than by design.

Finally, this book more than any other reflects all that I have learned from teachers such as yourself, for over the last five years I have gathered, studied, thought about, and gained invaluable lessons from the hundreds and hundreds of writing assignments I have collected from teachers around the country and used to identify the lessons I am excited to share with you in the book that follows.

Introduction

Designing the User's Journey

Friction refers to anything that prevents a user from accomplishing a goal. Friction weighs down interactions, making even the most well-designed interfaces a nightmare to use. . . . [So] your goal is to create interactions which unravel with a natural sense of order and logic.

—JERRY CAO, "How to Reduce Friction with Good Design"

Epiphanies in the Copy Room

One morning, while standing amid the gaggle of my restless colleagues in the copy room, waiting my turn and hoping the copy machine would not break down before I got my handouts copied, I began looking at the different handouts stacked on the counter. Ranging from an inch high to over a foot tall, the towers of handouts represented the best efforts of teachers to prepare students for the exams, careers, colleges, and demands that awaited them as future citizens and consumers. As colleagues engaged in the usual pregame chatter, students shuffled past the copy room on their way to the classes where they would work with these same teachers, some of them new, others with years of experience—and all of us struggling to meet the many different expectations and challenges that came from all sides in familiar and ever-changing forms.

While casually looking over one handout, I had the rather obvious epiphany that these documents, whether we display them on screens or distribute them on paper, are the secret operating systems of our classes, for these are the instruments we put into students' hands. One handout I studied raised complicated questions for me that had serious implications. What assumptions do we make about our students—about their needs,

interests, abilities, and knowledge? I started looking at the handouts around me more closely—the writing itself, the readability and usability of the documents, the appearance, conventions, and condition of them. I wondered if some of these features had different effects on students who struggled with learning difficulties or were still learning English. I began to wonder how the disinterested, failing student I was in high school (I graduated near the bottom of my class) would respond to some of the assignments I saw, as I looked at still other handouts while waiting to copy my own, which I had worked late the previous night to finish for class that day. I thought about similar assignments my own three children, having recently completed high school, had received. Some we had worked on for hours together to finish (Chaucer in a public school seventh-grade class where most parents spoke Chinese and Russian—seriously?). Others I had offered to help with, only to cause distress I could not have foreseen. ("But if you do that, it will be a *nine-sentence* paragraph and it has to be an *eight-sentence* paragraph!" my son lamented the one time when he let me help him with an English paper in middle school.) Other assignments I simply did not understand and could offer no help with, while many were, of course, perfectly reasonable and sound assignments.

Yet I also realize that we teach in a new and very different era from the one I encountered when I first entered the classroom. State standards. The rapid growth of Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The pressure to use and create more assignments for students to complete on the computers that now reside in so many (but not all) classrooms. Thus, many of the assignments I saw in the copy room will be, with increasing frequency, redesigned to be displayed and done on computer screens. They will not, of course, be better or more effective merely because they have been transformed into Google Docs or distributed through Google Classroom or a learning management system like Canvas, the latest solution to all problems that my district is requiring us to learn and use.

I was, without initially realizing it that day in the copy room, embarking on what Tom Newkirk describes as a "cycle of true research [in which we] take something [we] think we 'know'—and through sustained attention, begin to see it anew . . . to make the familiar strange" (2016, 8). What was made strange on that day was not only my own role as a teacher but also students themselves and the materials I designed for them to use. Over the next three years, I gathered hundreds of assignments from teachers and schools around the country, examining the various forms, features, and functions of these assignments. As a result, I came to understand that (1) our students are *users*—of our courses, materials, texts, and tools—whom we must understand and (2) we are *designers* who are charged with the task of removing from their journey through our curriculum what designers call "friction points" that can undermine students' learning and performance.

After that morning in the copy room, I began to see our work as designing not units and handouts, but experiences that, through the principles of design thinking, could be made more effective, more engaging, more instructive.

The designer Henry Dreyfuss captures this notion of the teacher as designer when he says that, whenever we design something, we must

> bear in mind that the object being worked on is going to be ridden in, sat upon, looked at, talked into, activated, operated or in some other way used by people. When the point of contact between the product and the people becomes a point of friction, then the [designer] has failed. On the other hand, if people are made safer, more efficient, more comfortable—or just plain happier—by contact with the product, then the designer has succeeded. (Adhikary 2009)

While Dreyfuss might be thinking about designing phones or chairs, books or bookcases, his point applies no less to the assignments and assessments, the handouts and digital documents we create for our students. The poorly designed handout, the incomprehensible directions, the overwhelmingly complex online app we thought we would use to make a simple task more interesting—these all come with their own friction points that affect students' ability to use the documents for their intended purpose: to help students learn in general and, in the context of this book, to learn to write well for academic purposes.

The Six Academic Writing Assignments We All Use

See Gordon Harvey's "A Brief Guide to the Elements of the Academic Essay" for an excellent, concise overview of academic writing.

It was with all these thoughts in mind about design thinking that I began to focus on the writing assignments we create for our students. Not just the prompts. Not just the questions. Not the genres as we routinely think of them, but the actual types of writing themselves and the design of those assignments, whether on paper or a screen. When I finished my journey through the eighteen-inch pile of academic writing assignments I had amassed along the way, I discovered that our writing assignments, whether in English classes, social studies, science, or any other class, fall into six categories.

Overview of the Six Major Academic Writing Assignments

1. *Writing to Learn:* Writing to learn (WTL) can be part of one's writing process (e.g., writing to generate ideas or discover connections); however, it can also be used to make sense of what students read, view, or listen to. WTL is an informal type of writing often done in a notebook, while taking notes, or following the

conventions of a specific discipline (e.g., scientific lab notes). WTL assignments tend to emphasize the thinking and content more than the style or quality of the writing.

2. *Short-Answer Writing:* Short-answer (SA) assignments range from one sentence to a paragraph. Though they appear on exams, they are also a constant on most homework and in-class assignments. They tend to ask students to explain or identify; some SA writing assignments follow the says–means–matters (SMM) format or an abbreviated version of the claim–reasoning–evidence (CRE) format. Such assignments emphasize content over style or quality of the writing, though there are inevitable exceptions, especially in English classes.
3. *Writing on Demand:* Writing-on-demand (WOD) assignments (a.k.a. timed writing) are associated with essay exams used by teachers, districts, states, or agencies such as the College Board or ACT to assess students' knowledge of or their ability to write for a certain purpose about a topic or text. In English classes, the quality of the writing should matter as much as the ideas and the content.
4. *Process Paper:* Process papers are those writing assignments, whether long or short, that require students to draft and revise their work in response to feedback from various possible sources. It's not so much a distinct type of writing assignment as it is an instructional approach to teaching writing. Process paper assignments emphasize the quality of the writing as well as the thinking and content.
5. *Research Paper or Report:* Research papers or reports are rare but essential. They prepare students for the longer papers they will write in college. These assignments require students to investigate questions or problems in depth and then anchor their claims and observations in texts, evidence, and findings from research. Such assignments emphasize the quality of the writing as well as the thinking and content; some, however, may place more value on the thinking and content if the assignment is designed to teach the conventions and moves of such writing through shorter forms or what are sometimes called "simulated research" assignments, which are similar to the AP language synthesis essay in that such assignments are often timed and the sources are provided.
6. *Alternative Forms:* Alternative forms share many moves and purposes with traditional academic writing assignments but include such forms as multimedia presentations or other digital forms or hybrids. Some alternative forms focus on the demands of real-world writing, such as résumés, proposals, or business letters. The quality of the writing tends to matter as much as the content, especially if it is for an authentic audience.

Assignments as a Window on Our Work

I was not the only one investigating the writing assignments being created for students. At the college level, around the same time, Dan Melzer (2014) was doing the same, analyzing the 2,101 writing assignments he collected from undergraduate courses across the curriculum. At the middle school level, Santelises and Dabrowski, the authors of a report titled *Checking In: Do Classroom Assignments Reflect Today's Higher Standards?*, were examining over 1,500 middle school assignments from around the country, guided by the idea that "students can rise no higher than the assignments they are given and the instruction they receive" (2015, 3). They went on to explain why assignments are, as I said earlier, the operating system of a school and its curriculum, asserting that these assignments

- are a clear window into classroom practice;
- represent what teachers know and understand about the college- and career-ready standards;
- give insight into the school leader's and/or district's expectations for what and how to teach;
- reflect what teachers believe students can do independently as a result of their teaching; and
- show how students interact with the curriculum. (3)

Meanwhile, Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer (2013) were concluding the first major study of middle and high school writing instruction since Applebee's 1981 study, much of which was done through a similar analysis of assignments, as well as observation of teachers in their classrooms. All these studies arrived at more or less the same conclusion: students could write much more than they do, but teachers struggle within the constraints imposed on them by state and district mandates to prepare students for a growing array of exams that limit the types of writing they assign.

My aim in this book is to help us better understand the nature of the academic writing assignments we give our students through the examination of these six different types of assignments we already give in one form or another and to discuss how we might improve what we already do by thinking of them through the principles of design thinking, which are generally broken up into the following stages:

Redesigning Theater's "The Design Thinking Process"

Empathize Work to fully understand the experience of the user for whom you are designing. Do this through observation, interaction, and immersing yourself in their experiences.

Define Process and synthesize the findings from your empathy work in order to form a user point of view that you will address with your design.

Ideate Explore a wide variety of possible solutions through generating a large quantity of diverse possible solutions, allowing you to step beyond the obvious and explore a range of ideas.

Prototype Transform your ideas into a physical form so that you can experience and interact with them and, in the process, learn and develop more empathy.

Test Try out high-resolution products and use observations and feedback to refine prototypes, learn more about the user, and refine your original point of view. (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University n.d.)

In recent years, the "users" (the students) for whom we design writing assignments have grown more complex and confusing to us in ways we struggle to understand but need to consider if we—and, more importantly, they—are to be successful. If we focus only on the writing skills we want them to learn through our assignments, ignoring the multiple literacies—academic, cultural, social, and emotional—people such as Alfred Tatum identify as so essential to effective and engaging assignments, we have little hope of assigning work that will have the power to teach and transform students as writers—and people (2005, 35).

The users for whom I design my daily lessons and assignments are profoundly different from those I taught when I arrived at Burlingame High School in the early 1990s. What was then a mostly white student body is now little more than half white, our largest nonwhite group being Latino students, followed by Asian students. For years, I taught AP literature, which became progressively more populated by female students; now, having taught what we call college prep (CP) English for over ten years, I must design my lessons for classes that are as high as 80 percent boys. Yet within my classes, regardless of gender, as many as 80 percent of my students are taking at least one AP class. So the intellectual range, which includes not only these students taking AP classes but also the roughly 20 percent of students with identified learning difficulties, further complicates the design process. This is all to say that knowing and understanding the people for whom we design anything, including writing assignments, is fundamental to the success of whatever we design for them.

The principles of design I discuss throughout this book are grounded in a few assumptions about our work that apply as much to me as they do to all others. First, I assume we share the belief that writing is important, that writing matters, that we know and accept this, even as we struggle to make as much room for it as we would like in our curriculum. Second, I assume that the ideas about design and assignments advanced throughout this book are compatible with those that guide your own instructional approach and philosophy. Whether you think in terms of the number of traits or paragraphs matters not to me here; rather, the framework provided here, which we will revisit throughout the book, is meant to complement your current practice, to merely inform and improve it, as it has my own in the years I have developed it. Third, I intend for these principles to be usable as soon as you sit down to design or refine your next writing assignment, whether it be a short-answer assignment or a major paper. The ideas here require no special training, nor do they seek to displace your current practices. They are, instead, guidelines you can use alongside your existing approach and practice. Finally, the ideas in the Academic Writing Assignment (AWA) Framework discussed throughout are designed to fit whatever grade level or course, whatever ability level or context you might find yourself working in, whether middle or high school, advanced classes or those regular mainstream classes of thirty-five restless seniors such as I teach every day.

Here, then, is the AWA Framework we will return to throughout, which you can apply to your own classes and assignments. Each class and assignment should be

- *anchored in clear goals linked to specific standards* appropriate to students' age and development, as well as the future exams they will take in class, for the state, or on national assessments;
- *grounded in texts* that are as engaging as they are demanding in terms of how those texts must be read and used in the writing task;
- *cognitively demanding* relative to the standards themselves and students' intellectual progress without being overwhelming and thus leaving students feeling defeated;
- *emotionally and intellectually engaging to all students* to the degree that the assignments give students some measure of choice when it comes to the texts, tasks, and topics they encounter in the context of the writing assignment;
- *designed to support students* in ways that help them meet the challenges of the writing task while also demonstrating their knowledge and skills

legitimately and independently despite such potential obstacles as language or learning difficulties;

- *assessed or evaluated according to criteria and requirements that are clearly stated up front* so students can use them as a guide and know how best to spend their time and energy when writing the assignment; and
- *written and formatted for maximum readability and ease of use* in language that is clear, consistent, concise, and correct, using a layout that makes clear what students need to do and how they need to do it.

Traditional writing assignments have focused on the moves, traits, genres, or rhetorical situations of academic writing, especially those emphasized by various standards documents, which all prize argument above all other writing. As you move through the chapters and the six types of academic writing assignments, you will note that I am offering a different view, one that does not treat each type as a discrete genre; rather, the six types of writing assignments represent the way we really work, the assignments we actually give, and what we can ask students to do within the constraints of time, class size, student needs, and available resources. More often than not, the six different assignments as I describe them here are not stand-alone assignments but tend to prepare students for other larger and often more complex assignments to come. What begins, for example, as a writing-to-learn assignment done in class in students' daybooks often lays the foundation for the short-answer paragraphs they will eventually write about a story we read and about which they'll later write an on-demand paper that draws on those initial short-answer paragraphs, possibly morphing into a process paper they will revise if we have time and cause to treat the on-demand essay as a draft instead of a final destination.

Our writing assignments, of course, must accomplish more than just giving us a way to daisy-chain one to another for a more logical, cohesive sequence. As you will see, in my class reading and writing are inextricably joined, one informing how students will do (and I will teach) the other. Nor are writing assignments ever merely a skill-delivery mechanism in my class; instead, they are carefully designed experiences meant to teach *and* transform, to educate *and* engage. Given the near-universal trend toward collaboration and alignment that PLCs (professional learning communities) and standards have ushered into our departments in the last decade, the writing assignments here also highlight the value and importance of a common language within and across grade levels (and departments, ideally) when it comes to designing writing assignments. In other words, I am motivated as a teacher and, here, as a writer who has worked with schools around the country for the

last five years, to address what can seem to be a fragmented curriculum that is frequently undermined by the private practices of some who often seem more interested in leading students up to the inspiration point than getting them to (and beyond) the perspiration point, which is where the learning and growth happen.

Returning to the copy room that morning when I first launched into this inquiry, did the assignments and handouts I waited to run off follow the guidelines I provide here? In ways, in parts, but not fully and not well. Has the aforementioned AWA Framework improved my writing instruction and students' writing performance? Completely. Design thinking and the AWA Framework have taught me to be more intentional, more conscious of the importance of every feature, from the words to the fonts that spell them to the decision to create the assignment for the screen or for paper. It has changed the way I view my role, transforming me from a teacher to a designer not just of documents but of experiences through which students learn how to write better by design.

Reflect on Your Own Practice

Before moving ahead to the first chapter, pause to consider the ideas presented in this introduction and how they apply to your own classes and practice in two areas: the six different types of academic writing assignments and the elements of the Academic Writing Assignment Framework. I suggest you do the following steps in your head, in writing, or as part of a discussion with members of your department or those instructional teams (sometimes called PLCs) to which you belong.

1. Generate a list of all the different writing assignments you have students do in a semester or during a specific unit you just finished or are about to begin. Then, using the six different types of academic writing assignments identified in this chapter as a guide, categorize the different types of writing assignments in your class or unit to determine whether you should consider adding or cutting back on certain types of writing assignments to achieve a more balanced and diverse range of assignments.
2. Examine the assignments on the list you created or a smaller subset of representative assignments in light of the AWA Framework to assess the degree to which these writing assignments include or could be improved to better incorporate the features listed on the framework.

This is, by the way, a good example of what I will refer to throughout the book as a friction point, some feature built into an assignment by design that is intended to draw students' attention to specific elements of the material or provide opportunities for dedicated practice of the skills we want students to learn.