



USING TEAM TASKS TO TEACH WRITING SKILLS

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Let's jump right in!

You are now students in my Professional Writing course.

Your first assignment in the course is to write a set of user-oriented instructions.

Today, you are going to read and evaluate two sets of instructions.

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Work on your own.

Background: Hello Fresh is a recipe subscription service that promises easy to prepare meals with "Quick and easy recipes, no fancy equipment or techniques, and no obscure ingredients."

You have two sets of instructions from a Hello Fresh box. Read both and **decide which one is more effective for Hello Fresh users.**
Mark or write down your answer.

- A. Jamie's Super-Speedy Steamed Salmon with Jewelled Couscous & Yogurt
- B. Italian Meatloaf

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Work with a group.

Share your individual choices and come to consensus about **which set of instructions is more effective for Hello Fresh users.**
Be prepared to share and defend your choice.

- A. Jamie's Super-Speedy Steamed Salmon with Jewelled Couscous & Yogurt
- B. Italian Meatloaf

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Let's hear your choices.

- Find the card that represents your group's choice.
- A. Jamie's Super-Speedy Steamed Salmon with Jewelled Couscous & Yogurt
 - B. Italian Meatloaf

When I count to 3, hold up your cards.

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Let's hear your choices.

- Find the card that represents your group's choice.
- A. Jamie's Super-Speedy Steamed Salmon with Jewelled Couscous & Yogurt
 - B. Italian Meatloaf
- What knowledge or experiences did you draw on to make your choice?
 - What were some of the strengths of each example?
 - What were some of the weaknesses of each example?
 - What were some of the key differences between these examples?

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What did we just do?

This is a task from my course in Professional Writing and is part of students' preparation to write a set of user-oriented instructions.

I use this task to

- elicit students' current readerly notions about effective writing of a particular type (user-oriented instructions)
- by having them
- analyze and evaluate two samples of writing of that type.

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Sometimes we forget that . . .

students arrive in our courses with decades of experience with the written word.

When we put them in the position of *readers* and ask them to analyze or evaluate writing samples, they can use that experience as a starting point to build upon.

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Having students work with concrete examples requires them to

- articulate their expectations about effective writing in a given domain or context;
- practice the kinds of decisions writers make; and
- use the criteria and expectations that guide evaluation of writing in context.

And we can ask them to do this work right away—*before* any direct instruction about how to write in the relevant genre.

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Sometimes we want to start here . . .

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How to write effective user-oriented instructions

- **Start with the user in mind:** Standard operating procedures (SOP) and work instructions are intended to improve employees' working routines. Unfortunately, documents of this type are rarely drafted with this purpose in mind. However, it is essential to design them with a focus on the users of the documents, their daily tasks, and their working environments, while maintaining compliance with production and safety standards. The information must be complete, accurate and easy to understand in order to prevent human error.
- **Focus on what matters:** Many work instructions provide too much technical detail. Even though it is always useful to include some detail, not everyone needs to know every last detail. It has been proven that our brain ignores certain information that it considers unnecessary. Take the same approach to writing operating procedures and work instructions and leave out details that are excessively technical.
- **Choose easily understandable, accessible vocabulary:** The text that describes work instructions is sometimes too complicated, with terms that are expressed in language that is too technical. These texts must be written in a clear and concise tone so that everyone can understand them. Avoid using jargon as much as possible: choose simple words instead.
- **Choose pictures over abstract text:** Sometimes, a picture says a thousand words. At work, a task can be easier to understand if it is described in images, rather than described in a long and complex piece of text. In other terms, choose simplicity and visual appeal.
- *Leave out details that are excessively technical in your work instructions.*

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More about how to write effective user-oriented instructions

- **Write action-oriented instructions:** Procedures are often written by engineers and are more like a description of the features of the machine than instructions enabling the user to perform tasks safely and with confidence. Improve your employees' experience by having instructions written by writers who can put themselves in the workers' shoes.
- **Provide a more accessible experience:** Employees need to get the right information at the right time. In the design phase, think about the best way to distribute instructions to your users at an early stage. Does this mean making instructions accessible offline, displaying them on the screen of a machine, providing a QR code or using NFC? An employee performing a task for the first time will need to access step-by-step instructions while doing so, at the place where the task is to be performed.
- **Integrate your instructions into your training process:** Learning about what an operation involves is not always enough to understand the context of the task — especially in more complex cases. Users must start with a full understanding of the context. Instructions, when properly designed, become crucial element of the training system, enabling employees to immerse themselves in their working environment. Your instructions must be integrated into your internal training systems such as LMS, E-learning, MoC, or face-to-face training.
- **Implement a continuous improvement process:** Your employees must be able to share their feedback, questions or suggestions for improvement. More experienced users will be able to offer useful and important information on existing operating procedures. Monitor the feedback that you receive to ensure your instructions are updated continuously. Choosing the right procedure documentation solution can help in achieving ISO 9001 certification and implementing your quality management system.
- *Instructions, when properly designed, become crucial element of the training system.*

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Even more about how to write effective user-oriented instructions

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- Etc., etc., etc. . . .

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When we start with all the “rules,”

students see writing as a set of abstract, arbitrary steps to be carried out, with no real purpose.

When we start with (and keep working from) their experience as readers, we can help them see writing as **a set of actions or decisions that matter** because they influence the way a reader responds to the text.

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A model for tasks that help students begin to think like writers

- Same problem (all groups have the same samples of writing)
- Significant problem (samples are directly relevant to an assignment students are working on)
- Specific choice (students choose from limited options to make a decision or judgment about those samples)
- Simultaneous report (all groups share their choices at the same time and then explain their reasoning)

Note: We just did this!

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And most importantly, effective group tasks are followed by

- **Debrief and discussion**, where groups share the reasoning behind their choices;
- **Feedback from the instructor**, explaining where students' thinking was misguided or diverges from the ways in which experts would evaluate the samples of writing under discussion and the big principles that guide writing in this genre; and
- **Written reflection**, where students articulate how their thinking has changed as a result of the task and discussion, as well as planning for how they will use what they learned in their upcoming work.

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Let's look at some more examples of tasks.

See the handout.

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Use the prompts below to help you reflect on and begin applying what you've learned today.

1. What is one idea from today's session that will affect the way you think about teaching writing?
2. Choose an approach from the handout and begin to sketch out some ideas for how you might implement this approach in a course you're currently teaching or will be teaching soon. You may choose to make adaptations but make sure you plan to use writing samples and try to use the 4 S structure.
 - Significant problem
 - Same problem
 - Specific choice
 - Simultaneous report

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References

- Bean, J. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Roberson, B., & Franchini, B. (2014). Effective task design for the TBL classroom. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25(3&4), 275-302.
- Sweet, M., & Michaelsen, L. K. (Eds.). (2011). *Team-based learning in the social sciences and humanities: Group work that works to generate critical thinking and engagement*. Dulles: Stylus Publishing.
- Zimmerman, B.J., & Risemberg, R. (1997). Becoming a self-regulated writer: A social cognitive perspective. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 22(1), 73-101.

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Thank you!

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions about today's session.

Slides and handouts will be posted on the Lilly Conference website after the session.

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