In-Class Handwritten Assessments

In-Class Handwritten “Bluebook” Assessments

Making the transition to handwritten assessments requires intentional planning and scaffolding. The following are recommendations for making handwritten assessments work for you and your students, alongside a model assignment to help get you started.

Many of our learners are used to typing their work, which differs from handwriting in both cognitive function and physical execution. Typing allows paragraphs to be reorganized, evidence to be inserted, and errors to be corrected with minimal disruption to a person’s train of thought. In **The Shallows**, Nicolas Carr discusses how difficult it became to write by hand after the computer emerged: “I found I could no longer write or revise anything on paper. I felt lost without the Delete key, the scrollbar, the cut and paste functions, the Undo command” (p. 13). Handwriting is slower and more linear than typing. Revising by hand means crossing out or rewriting text, requiring more planning before committing words to the page to avoid messy edits. However, when differences between handwritten and typed assignments are considered, handwritten assessments can enhance overall learning and retention, provided learners are supported in rethinking how they produce writing (Petrocelli, 2025).

As you plan for in-class writing assessments, it is important to consider how handwriting might slow output speed and affect learners who rely on typing fluency to organize their ideas. Hand fatigue, legibility, and time constraints can affect performance.

Recomendations

- ☐ Align the assessment with core **learning objectives** to ensure the task supports the intended learning outcome
- ☐ Provide low-stakes practice opportunities. Incorporate short, in-class writing activities that mirror parts of the higher-stakes assessment. Prioritize time to debrief the practice opportunities so students can learn from the feedback in advance.
- ☐ Share or model sample responses and discuss as a class what makes them effective using a **rubric** (e.g., clarity, focus, use of evidence, reasoning).
- ☐ Provide **task guidance** so it is clear to learners what each part of the assessment should accomplish (e.g., define the concept, apply it to an example, then critique or reflect).

- ☐ To support students with pacing themselves, provide a sample breakdown of time for the planned writing period (e.g., plan [6 min.], draft [15 min.], review [4 min.]).
- ☐ Communicate what, if anything, students should bring with them to class to support the writing (e.g., annotated selected readings, concept maps, class notes, dataset).
- ☐ Let learners know that ideas will be prioritized over polish, emphasizing depth, accuracy, and clarity over stylistic perfection. This can help to reduce anxiety and perfectionism.
- ☐ Plan for access by reviewing any learner accommodations provided by **Student Accessibility Services**.
- ☐ Discuss with learners the importance of **writing to support in-depth understanding and learning** rather than as an anti-cheating mechanism.

Model Assignment

Using the **Transparent Assignment Design framework** (Winkelmes et al., 2016), instructors can communicate to learners the purpose of a hand-written assessment, the tasks required both before and during an assessment, and the success criteria. Being transparent about the skills and knowledge gained, the reason why a learning experience was planned in a particular way, and the instructor's expectations of an assessment improves learning outcomes and boosts academic confidence for all students.

The model assignment, modified from **Dr. Kelly Hallinger's** COLL 150 course, is designed with this framework to support learner success.

Additional Reading

Petrocelli, J. V. (2025). Return of the blue books: Grading in the time of artificial intelligence. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 57*(4), 25-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2025.2511577

Winkelmes, M. A., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review, 18*(1/2), 31-36. https://go.wm.edu/9qDybQ

Sample In-Class Writing Assignment

Logical Assignment Name: **Popular Science Article Midterm Writing**

Due Date: **90-minute Midterm Period on 03/xx/2026**

PURPOSE

How will this assignment benefit student learning beyond the context of this class?

- ☐ Skills used to complete this assignment (research, collaboration, etc.)
- ☐ Knowledge gained from the assignment (discipline- or career-specific connections)

This semester, we have explored how scientific information is communicated through technical and narrative texts. The Popular Science article communicates technical, scientific discoveries to an interested general audience through a clear structure that presents all the parts of a traditional primary-source article in narrative form.

Through writing a popular science article, you will:

- Practice critical and close reading
- Identify and summarize key ideas of a complex, scientific, technical text
- Shape a narrative for a target audience

By completing this assignment, you will have a deeper understanding of how to closely read a technical text and how to translate it into a clear and concise narrative that communicates complex ideas in your own lively, intelligent, and interesting voice.

TASK(S)

What will learners need to do to complete this assignment?

- ☐ Break the assignment down into manageable chunks (e.g., a checklist, parts, deadlines).

What:

Find a primary scientific article about a naturally occurring pattern (physical, chemical, biological) of your choosing and translate it into a popular science article written for educated non-scientists.

How:

This purpose dictates the structure of a popular science article. Because they are written for an audience of educated non-scientists, they must:

- Draw the reader in early and make them want to stay with a clear, compelling introduction that begins by revealing the study's major finding (i.e., results) and discusses its broad implications (i.e., “why should I care about this study?”).
- Delve into what researchers actually did through the body of the article (ie, introduction and methods)
- End with a conclusion that leaves the reader with a final thought (e.g., where the research could go in the future or a potential broad impact to consider further).

Before your midterm:

1. Identify a primary scientific article about a pattern of your choosing
2. Read the article carefully, identifying key ideas. (1-2 hours depending on how long it takes you to identify your article)

During your midterm:

1. Draft your introduction (30 min.)
2. Draft the body of the article on what the researchers did (20 min.)
3. Draft the conclusion of the article (20 min.)
4. Revise, proofread, and edit (10 min)

When:

Identify your article and complete a close read before coming to class for the midterm period. Complete the written assignment during the midterm period (90 minutes).

Where

The written portion of the assignment will be completed during the midterm class period.

Resources:

Access to the internet and library databases at W&M Libraries for finding a primary scientific article.

With Whom:

This is an individual assignment. Collaboration is not permitted —not even with AI.

CRITERIA/EXPECTATIONS

What are the characteristics of a successful product?

- ☐ Is there a rubric you will use for grading? (share with students upfront)
- ☐ What are the success criteria you’re looking for?

Checklist:
-Have you given your article an impactful title?
-Have you followed the structure of a Popular Science article?
-Is your article easy to read for an audience of educated non-scientists?
-Does your article make sense?
-Is it logically sequenced?
-Does your article provide a full citation in CSE format?

Rubric or Examples:
- An example of a well-annotated Popular Science article was covered in class. Please refer to Blackboard before your midterm to review.
- Your work will be evaluated based on accuracy, depth of analysis, clarity of your prose, and adherence to the structure of a Popular Science article. You are being evaluated on your ideas and your narrative writing voice, not on the polish of the article. I want to see your actual understanding of the scientific content and how you communicate that information.
- See attached rubric.

Please ensure that you do not collaborate with anyone or AI on this assignment. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out during office hours or via email.

Adapted from the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) Project