

Writing in SGPPM courses: Session I & II

Critique & Comments of GEOL 200 Term Paper Assignment

- No way to understand the assignment
- The assignment is not designed for an introductory paleontology class; it is too high
- There are contradictions in the assignment, and parts are vague
- An audience is not identified for the paper
- Sections are diverse in their instructions to the student
- The assignment shoots too high for the first paleontology course
- The assignment is to discuss issues and methods and undertake a technical review but the students they're told they don't have sufficient background in paleontology, but must use at least, if not more than, 10 references
- It is unclear for whom the paper is written, maybe the professor?
- The purpose is to discuss paleontological issues and the assignment is made early in the semester before students are introduced to such issues

Critique & Comments of GEOL 201 Term Paper Assignment

- Assignment is written in a negative tone as if students are disrespected
- What is the purpose and goals of the assignment
- It is explicit with no expectations
- Length of the term paper is not specified
- Bold face and underlined text is distracting and unnecessary
- There is a bunch of good information in the handout, but it is not easily accessible
- Topics are jargony, which would be unfamiliar to the beginning student
- Possibly the paper of unspecified length will be written for the professor, but is unclear
- The exercise is a quasi-self directed learning experience
- The purpose of the paper appears to be to have the student follow instructions rather than to explore a topic
- There is a very detailed, specific format, although inconsistencies exist in the instructions

Deconstructed Personal Term Paper Assignment Ideas

Formal (Graded) pre-writing assignment

- Provide an outline of the senior thesis with the project's hypothesis
- Write the hypothesis to be tested and provide 2-3 references to be used as literature
- Develop an annotated bibliography and identify the "holy grail"—the one paper that is consistently cited in these texts. Identify in which sections of the term paper each annotated citation will be used.
- Have students make a new laboratory exercise for the course based on the laboratory exercise just completed. How would you redesign the exercise?
- Develop a list of the Big Questions on the chosen topic
- Mine the keywords from 5 papers and use these to develop a bibliography

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- Develop a thesis statement identifying five pertinent references
 - Have students respond to the who, what, how, and why questions pertaining to their project
 - After taken a field trip and using the published field-trip guide, write the author of the guide with questions about what the student did or did not see, or something about the guidebook that was unclear
 - After returning from the field, have students compare field notes and write a “new” field guide from the perspective of the other student’s observations (also could be informal exercise)
 - Have peers review one another’s “pitching an idea” about the project

Informal (non-graded) pre-writing assignment

- Write a letter to your grandmother explaining your thesis topic
- Write a letter to a potential employer explaining your research
- Provide prior exam questions and ask students to answer them
- Write a one paragraph summary of the paper and pose questions for your classmates to answer
- Write a book for kindergarten children on the term paper topic
- Explain to a cab driver why taxpayer money should be spent on your research
- Write to the author of a field guide, a manuscript, or a review paper with questions about misunderstood ideas or concepts
- Write a letter in support of a proposal to turn a local, regional, national area into a geopark; advocacy
- Develop a Venn Diagram of the literature a student has acquired to see if both sides of the argument are equally represented from which a balanced paper can be written
- Have the student group present the theme of their project to the remainder of the class

Develop a “New” Writing Exercise and identify (1) the audience and (2) the task to convey

- Using social media, write a blog for the general public on some resource
- Write an article for Time Magazine or the NY Times based on the term paper written for class (e.g., Review the “Origin of Metazoans” for the general public
- Create text for a museum display from a “mystery (unknown) bone” provided in laboratory
- Explain the significance of your research project to a consulting company
- Tell a potential major why your field of interest is the best ever
- Develop a public-bid project on some key issues
- Write a white paper to convince peers of a policy stance with (1) a critique of a media article published on the policy or how the media has portrayed the policy; (2) read two or more scientific articles and evaluate these in the context of media portrayal; and (3) write two abstracts, one from the scientific side and one from the media side of the debate
- Develop a report on the flood hazards of an urban setting. Scaffolded exercises can

include (1) a report to the City Council on flooding and flood hazards, (2) a position paper on the purpose of mitigating flood hazards and the benefits to the town, and (3) a newspaper or report describing basic erosion and flood processes. A video time series of the variables, providing imagery, could also be done.

- Develop a proposal to conserve a state park or area after having visited the site on a field trip. Phased exercises could include the field trip report, a media or blog posting, a proposal written to a stakeholder requesting project funding.
- Create a series of short reports to inform the general public about landslide hazards. These could include: (1) news article (for print or radio), (2) a policy statement in which proposals for building construction on unstable areas are given, (3) a field guide in which case studies are highlighted, and (4) an engineering report on best practices to build on slopes.