

## Contextual Learning: Real-World Assignments Overview

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Having been an English teacher for (never mind how long), I know that writing assignments can easily become trite and disengaged from the real world in which students live. I do not like reading forty essays about what they did on their summer break. Plus, how many times can I read an explication of the same short stories over and over without wanting to crawl into Gilman's wallpaper myself?

There is nothing wrong with a five-by-five essay.

There is nothing wrong with using rhetorical modes – cause and effect, compare and contrast, etc.

There is nothing wrong, but that does not make it right.

*The standard fare for English composition classes is often a tried-and-true meandering through the various rhetorical modes to produce perfectly formatted five-by-five essays.*

Surely that has got to be more! Yes, there is.

The following is about real-world assignments that grew out of my writing for a regional magazine.

### Profile Biography:

Students select and interview someone (not family) and write about him/her. This assignment encompasses primary and secondary research, generating questions, analysis of data, etc. As with any writing assignment, this one addresses the writing process. For example, in addition to giving feedback on the classmates' papers, students see examples of my articles in process in the form of my submitted draft, the editor's revised draft, and the final published version of an article. This assignment requires students to focus on the research process as well as the writing process. They must do some preliminary research on their interviewee to develop focused interview questions. Once they have gathered data in the interview, they must transcribe the recorded interview and analyze what they have discovered. A quality profile does not just list facts about a person; instead, it finds the person's story or essence.

### "A Place with Character" Descriptive Paper:

This is a twist on the descriptive essay. Students must locate what I call "a place with character" to write about. This designation is somewhat subjective, but I give examples, such as Miller's Steam Plant, Sloss Furnace, Rickwood Field, Majestic Caverns, Noccalula Falls. As with traditional descriptive papers, class discussions include dominant impression, spatial order, vivid modifiers. Students must have seen in



person the location they select. I ask them to provide pictures of the location. These could be some they take during the term, photos from a past vacation, or an online source. (This allows me to see the location and help them analyze it.)

There is a research component to the assignment. The student must also interview someone(s) with a significant connection to the location, which addresses source validity. I allow additional sources as well, though most students do not have to utilize them.

*These assignments get students out of the classroom, out of their comfort zones, and into their communities!*

### **Students get real-world writing experience; they also get real-world jobs!**

More than one of my students has been hired as an intern or staff writer from my recommendation based on their success with these assignments. (I will bring some sample published articles by my former students.)

The writing classroom is *not* the only place real-world assignments can be created.

*What is your field? What type of real-world assignments could you create for your students?*

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For the two assignments, I have provided my instructions and a number of handouts that I use. Of course, I have discussions they must post and videos about the assignment in my learning management system that are not included here.

