

# Cornerstone Guide to Designing Essay Assignments

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## As you design an essay assignment, please consider the following:

**Think Creatively.** Develop a question that proposes writing that you would *want* to read and that students would *want* to produce on topics that are relevant and interesting.

**Lessons Learned.** Ask yourself what Learning Outcomes your students will demonstrate by the type of writing you have chosen to have them complete in this assignment. Consider listing them on the assignment.

**Audience.** For whom should they imagine themselves writing?

**Key Words.** What do the key words in the instructions mean to students (e.g., *analyze*, *argue*, *critique*, *explore*, *evidence*, *support*)?

**Evidence.** What form of evidence is required, and do your students know how to reference it correctly.

**Word Count.** Giving students a word count will help them (and you). They need to learn concision and clarity.

## Preparing students to succeed:

**Presenting the Assignment.** Discuss the assignment in class so students can ask questions and have the assignment in mind as they read and discuss the texts. Remember to explain what you mean by the key words (e.g., *argue*) used in your assignment.

**Research.** If research is involved, you will need to review how to obtain and evaluate sources as well as how to cite them using APA.

**Rubric.** If you intend to use a rubric, please go over it with them. Be as transparent as possible about how you will evaluate their work.

**Authenticity.** Review your expectations concerning AI-generated texts and sources.

## Scaffolding the Writing Process:

**Scaffolding.** Smaller assignments should prepare students for larger ones. Students should engage in some thinking and writing in class before writing a draft. For larger papers, students should submit outlines or drafts and receive feedback (even if the latter is only a response to a proposal or thesis statement).

**Consultation.** If possible, meet with students individually to discuss their writing. Nothing inspires them more than feeling like you care about their work and development.

**Reflection.** Students should reflect on each stage of their writing.

## Completing your Assignment:

**Modeling.** This is the most effective method for teaching writing. When you complete your own assignment, you will truly be able to evaluate its clarity and effectiveness. You will also see how you might be unnecessarily taxing your students. But, above all, you will be providing your students with a model of *how* to complete the assignment and *what* clear and concise prose looks like.

**Here's an example.** The reading is Book 2 of More's *Utopia*.

**Step one:** After a brief lecture on More and the Northern Renaissance, we discuss the following questions in class:

- Is More serious? Is his *Utopia* a satire or an honest effort to resolve sixteenth-century issues?
- Given human nature, to what degree is More's conception of a perfect community a realistic endeavor? Would it work or would it collapse?
- What are the positive features of More's *Utopia*? What are the problems?
- What problems do we deal with in today's world that More resolves in *Utopia*, and what problems are we dealing with that he does not address?

**Step two:** Students hand-write a two-page essay in class.

### The Assignment:

**Your task is to argue** that More's *Utopia* is a blueprint for a perfect society, using evidence from the text. Your audience is comprised of educated readers who wish to learn more about More's *Utopia*. Your first draft is an in-class handwritten paper, at least 2 pages long. You may use your book.

**Introduction:** In your first paragraph, you will introduce Sir Thomas More and his book, *Utopia*. Your first paragraph should also state your thesis. You will argue that book 2 of *Utopia* is meant to be taken seriously as a remedy for the problems confronting More's sixteenth-century contemporaries. How you will argue this claim is up to you.

**The Thesis** is your argument. It is the reason you are writing and the reason your essay is being read.

- Telling your reader what you will do in your essay is not a thesis.
- A thesis is an argument (a statement + because). You must state the claim for which you will argue and why.
- For example: “In this essay, I will review the advantages of living in More’s utopian community.” *This is not a thesis.*
- On the other hand, “In this essay, I argue that More’s book is meant as a satire because the solutions he presents are utterly absurd and do not take into consideration human nature.” *This is a thesis.*
- You can also present your thesis in more than one sentence as in the below model essay.

**The Body** of your essay reinforces your argument, using examples from the text. You may quote or paraphrase. For this assignment, if you quote, just place the page number in parentheses after the quote since we are all using the same edition.

- For example, More explains, “In Utopia they have a six-hour working day.” (p. 56)

**The Model:** Provide students with your own response to your assignment. Here I argue that More is writing a satire.

**Model Essay given to students with the assignment:**

Sir Thomas More’s short treatise, *Utopia*, was written at the outset of the sixteenth century. Scholars know a lot about More. He was a statesman, a devoted Catholic and defender of the Church in Rome, as well as a humanist deeply immersed in Renaissance culture. *Utopia* is More’s greatest contribution to humanist learning, and, true to the motifs of the Northern Renaissance, it addresses the issues of the age: war, colonization, poverty, scarcity, greed, and ignorance. But is it a blueprint for the perfect society? This essay argues that More’s utopian society is not meant to offer realistic proposals to the problems of the sixteenth century. More’s solutions to the afflictions he identifies are too extreme, if not absurd, to be taken seriously. How do we know? There are clues throughout *Utopia* that suggest More’s solutions are satiric, and sometimes he even seems to be having a bit of fun with the reader. But mostly the solutions he offers are too harsh, bland, impractical, if not just plain ridiculous.

There is a clue early on that More’s book is a satire. He begins his book with “The Utopian Alphabet.” He provides a transliteration that makes absolutely no sense and a “word for

word” translation that makes only very little sense. Furthermore, it’s all riddle: “not island made island,” and “willingly I-impart my-thing, not not willingly.” (5) Is this cleverness? Are we supposed to read deeply into his meaning? I suspect More is playing with us, making us think there must be something hidden that can be teased out by the learned scholar, when in fact this is nonsensical. But perhaps a better giveaway occurs on the very next page, where we find a poem entitled, “Lines on the Island of Utopia by the Poet Laureate, Mr. Windbag’s Nosenso’s Sister’s Son.” (6) That we have a poem about Utopia written by Mr. Windbag’s sister’s son, in other words, a nobody, is a strong signal that More is writing a satire.

Book II describes the island of Utopia. The tone is serious and straightforward. Should the reader take this seriously as a model for a perfect community? At times, it would seem so, especially since More maintains his clear and direct narrative style. There are lines that praise the Utopians. They seem to suggest that this is a model society that Europeans should imitate. There are positive aspects to this society: workdays are short, and no one goes without clothing and food; in fact, agricultural surpluses are given freely to the poor among other countries; hospital patients are prioritized and cared for with kindness. In fact, More seems to have provided us with an ideal society in which there is no greed or sloth, no beggars or homelessness, no reason not to have attained some education and contentment with one’s trade, everyone lives in a family unit, and public disputes are “very rare.” (54)

But is this an ideal society? To be sure, there are aspects of it that are repulsive to today’s morality. Utopians keep slaves and colonize the lands around them as needed. These lands are not uninhabited. The aboriginal peoples living in these lands are assimilated into the new colonies formed by Utopians, with a single way of life “under Utopian management” (60). If the natives don’t do what they’re told, they are expelled. If they resist, Utopians declare war and take the land by force. But neither slavery nor wars of conquest would seem immoral to More’s contemporaries and his justification of that war (that the natives were not utilizing their lands) would have been perfectly reasonable to a sixteenth-century mindset.

On the other hand, More’s contemporaries would find other aspects of his Utopia unsettling, if not shocking: men and women inspect each other naked before marriage; premarital sex is punished by celibacy for life; adultery, by slavery or death; hunting and hawking – a coveted pastime among the rich in More’s society – is considered pure “idiocy” by the Utopians as is gambling which was also a highly popular among all ranks of English in the sixteenth

century. They would have found his devaluation of precious metals absurd. Iron, glass and earthenware, due to their utility, are deemed valuable. “Plates and drinking-vessels, though beautifully designed are made of quite cheap stuff” while silver and gold are used for the “humblest items of domestic equipment, such as chamber-pots” or the shackles for slaves. (67) Pearls and diamonds are toys for toddlers that they later grow out of, as they do dolls and charms. All splendor is “merely degrading.” (68)

These are some very harsh solutions to the problems More seeks to solve: instability within families; the time and fortunes wasted by meaningless pastimes that are sometimes cruel and dangerous; the decadence and display of the rich who adorn themselves and attach meaning to shiny pebbles and rocks. In a sense, More seems to be saying, “You want solutions to society’s ills? Here are a few but you are not going to like them.” In essence, his Utopia eradicates individualism in the name of social harmony. The only way to curb human impulses is through severe remedies that are worse than the problem itself. More’s Utopia isn’t a model society; it’s a joke on us for imagining we can engineer human nature.

**Step three:** Collect their handwritten essays and write comments on each, how to improve their clarity and reinforce their arguments. Don’t obsess over small mistakes or even grammar. Concentration on big issues. Return the papers and ask them to polish their essays on their laptops (this can be done either at home or in class). The final version should be approximately 800 words or 2-3 pages, double-spaced. They must turn in their final version along with their handwritten version.

Modeling assignments takes time and patience, but by doing so, you will begin to see real results.

Parts of this guide were loosely adapted from the “Harvard Guide to Responding to Student Writing,” Harvard Writing Project. “Modeling: Complete your Assignment” was developed by Melinda S. Zook in consultation with Elise Frketich. Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts, Purdue University (7/2/2025).