

Tell Me a Smart Story: On Podcasts, Videos, and Websites as Writing Assignments

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About two years ago at my university, I designed a minor in the medical humanities. At its core was a class that introduced students to medical topics from the perspectives of the humanities and social sciences. When it came to designing assignments that would show how well they understood such varied concepts, I decided to go out on a pedagogical limb.



If they preferred, students could write a traditional research paper for their final project. Or they could "write" about their topic in a different way — via a 45-minute podcast, a 10-to-15-minute video, a website, or an interactive, digital essay (on a blog or a Word document) that used embedded videos, photos, and audio to help the reader understand their topics.

To say I was nervous about trying out innovative ways of getting them to write is an understatement.

For one, I knew that grading one of these nontraditional projects would take me much longer than grading a regular paper (after all, I can read faster than I can listen or watch) — and extra time is something that few faculty members have to spare. Second, I was worried about the quality of the projects. Would students understand the challenges of putting together an informative, substantive podcast or video?

From the very beginning, I warned my students that opting to turn in one of these newer forms would not be easy. I told them the bare truth:

- You can't just ramble on for an hour and expect a good grade. To tell a good digital story, I warned, you first have to storyboard the topic. Most of what you say has to be planned — not improvised.
- All of these "fun" formats would require significant writing. Yes, writing. In fact, choosing to do a podcast, a video, or a website might require them to do much more work than writing a traditional paper or even an interactive essay.

Because our Millennial and Gen Z students already receive most of their information in those formats, I thought it might be rewarding and educational for them to try constructing one themselves. I thought they might be invigorated by trying something new. I hoped they would work longer and harder if it was "fun" and if the final product was something they could actually share on social media.

In short, I was trying to trick them into writing and thinking more analytically and deeply about their chosen topics than they might have done if they had just cranked out another rote academic paper.

The first semester, hardly anyone took me up on the offer. I received only two podcasts but they were excellent. It was clear that both students had thought diligently about how to structure their pieces and had interwoven interviews, audio clips, and music clips with their research. Not only that, because my students are often more digitally savvy than me, both podcasts sounded similar to something you might hear on NPR.

An additional 10 students that same semester tried out the interactive essay — adding video, pictures, and audio to illustrate something they were writing about in a digital format like a blog post. I had set a hard limit on how much of the page length could be taken up with such things and had rules about how they could be used. Most of the students who tried the new interactive-essay format did very well — though, in the interest of radical honesty, I did have some duds.

Over all, I considered the experiment to be a partial success. But I kept at it in subsequent semesters and eventually adopted the approach in other courses I teach. The result: More and more students are opting out of the traditional paper and in to one of the innovative final projects — and most excel at it.

Skeptics will, I'm sure, insist that podcasts, videos, and websites are *not* writing assignments.

I would argue that they absolutely are. They require students to organize materials in a similar way and to literally write out their scripts. And just because these arguments are not made in a dry, formal prose style doesn't mean they aren't effective or smart. In most cases, I've found that students who choose to do one of these nontraditional research projects are making better arguments and end up putting a lot more effort into the overall project.

Here's my best argument for trying this in your own classes, summed up in — of course — a good story.

What struck me most about that first experiment was this: A couple of the students who had turned in lackluster reading responses all semester long had clearly taken the interactive essay — with its less formal and more journalistic tone — very seriously.

A standout in this category was a male student athlete who sat in the back corner of the classroom with three other athletes. Often it was clear they hadn't done the readings, and the quality of their reading responses reflected that — yet they seemed alert and interested during class. This particular student, however, was quiet. So quiet that I had no idea what his voice sounded like, since he had never uttered a word in class discussions.

On his final project, he had chosen to do the interactive essay. His subject was rapid weight-loss techniques used by wrestlers before "weigh-ins" for competition and their effects on mental and physical health. He deftly used videos to illustrate not only how the techniques themselves worked, but how they were shared on social media and set up a culture that normalized dangerous methods of weight loss. He applied concepts from class and used them to work out his own personal relationship to his training routines and diet.

He wrote, very movingly, about how wrestling affected his body image and sense of self. At the bottom of the essay, he wrote a short note to thank me for allowing him to write in a nontraditional, creative way. He also said that the process of doing research on the topic had fundamentally changed how he would train as a wrestler and that he would no longer participate in the more dangerous weight-loss techniques.

He would, he said, never forget the class or what he had learned. If that's not a major pedagogical victory, then I don't know what is.

Perhaps the bigger victory, from my point of view, is that these types of projects make it harder for students to plagiarize, steal ideas, or otherwise phone it in. Podcasts, videos, websites/blogs, and interactive essays require students to personalize their projects. Because I require them to link their topics to at least three specific texts we've covered in class, it's nearly impossible to fake this (though to be fair, I'm sure it's still possible, if less likely).

You may pooh-pooh this as anecdotal evidence, but I suspect that if this student were writing a traditional paper, he wouldn't have chosen this subject and he wouldn't have done as much work. I've had other students do amazing projects since then that equal or surpass this student's "aha!" moment.

Letting students write in nontraditional ways — and in formats that would not have looked like writing a generation ago — could potentially have a major impact on our classrooms.

In my experience, these projects help create a different dynamic in class. Just ask any writing instructors who have assigned interactive blogs as part of their reading-response assignments — students tend to participate more on the blogs, ask more questions, and engage more with one another.

In other words, they learn how to engage more closely with class materials and how to think more deeply about a subject when they're doing a nontraditional, more creative project.

In grading the students' final projects — whether they had opted to write a paper or gone the nontraditional route — I took steps to make sure I was evaluating them all as equally as possible. I set average length requirements so that each type of project involved a similar amount of writing. All projects had to (a) turn in a bibliography or works-cited page, (b) use three to five references from texts we had covered in class, and (c) use three concepts discussed during lectures. Whatever the format, the introduction, the body, and the conclusion all needed to forge a coherent argument. In every format, I sought to reward creativity and clear "writing."

The grading rubric, more or less, remained the same across project type. To this day, I've never had any students complain to me about the grading. It's a fair system and they understand the challenges of the various formats before they choose one. It does take more time to grade a 45-minute podcast than a 15-page paper, but I find ways to make the time. Much like other podcasts, I listen to my students' while I cook, clean, or commute, taking small notes for grading purposes.

But what if you are not a tech-savvy instructor? Don't be afraid to assign these types of projects, anyway.

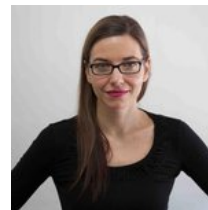
First, your students are probably more knowledgeable about the technology than you. I have never created a podcast or a video myself, but I found plenty of tech advice and guidance available online.

Most institutions today also have tech available — and tech assistance — to create videos and podcasts. My university has a recording room and equipment that students can reserve and work on their projects either alone or collaboratively. If your university doesn't have that, students can easily record audio and video using their smartphones and laptops. Trust me, most of them already know how to do these things swiftly and adeptly.

I'm not saying this approach is a magical panacea for all of our ills in getting 21st-century students to read, write, and think. And I would never suggest that it's right for every classroom or every subject.

However, podcasts, short videos, websites, and other interactive writing assignments are especially useful tools for getting students to engage more analytically and critically with subjects in which they are already interested. Knowing how to pursue a deeper understanding of a topic, in turn, will make them better future citizens.

Don't agree? Then please feel free to leave your critical responses below in the form of a short podcast or video.



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