



## Writing Assignment Tool (WAT)

Dear Colleague,

In this document you will find different topics for writing assignments which you can hand out to your students. As talented students tend to seek challenging assignments inside and outside of university, and since not every class will offer these assignments in the beginning, using the material below can be supportive in spotting talented students.

You can hand out the assignments in the very beginning of the new study period. It is not meant to be a mandatory task, but rather it should be voluntarily worked on. You can set your own deadline or restrict the accepted assignments to a maximum (f.e. only the first five handed in assignments will be accepted).

If you want to, you can restrict the type of assignment (f.e. essay, note).

In addition, you will find helpful suggestions of how to evaluate the writing assignments with the SOLO taxonomy. Of course, you as a teacher will have also your own ideas and perceptions of what an assignment for talented students should include. Therefore, the provided suggestions are only meant to assist you when using the assignment.

You can skip the introduction and explanation to the different types of writing assignments if you are only interested in the task itself and not in the “why” of choosing each assignment.

You can choose which assignment (dilemmas, develop personally, use your talent) you want to hand out. You could also leave the choice of what assignment to work on to your students.

### Introduction

Talented students often show different character traits when compared with more mainstream students, which can allow teachers to spot them. Regarding learning strategies, students already enrolled in honors often rewrite papers and apply theories (Buckner et al., 2016; Achterberg, 2015). It is assumed that talented students not yet enrolled in honors do show sort-a-like character traits. Some of the traits can hardly be discovered during regular class, especially when taking into account that not every talented student obviously shows these character traits. Additionally, we know from research on learning strategies that a questionnaire about the learning strategies used by a student does not always reproduce the actually used learning strategies (g.e. Leutner & Leopold, 2002, 2003). Therefore, spotting talented students cannot be solved only by observation or by using tools such as questionnaires or checklists. Talented students have the potential to rise to the top, and their way to handle assignments can give a hint on their talent, as well.

Giving every student the opportunity to voluntarily hand in a writing assignment can already give a hint about those students willing to do more than the regular curriculum or class offers.

## Different topics of Writing Assignments

### Solve Dilemmas

Both Europe and the world are changing rapidly and are facing issues which need to be addressed. But there are no easy answers to these great dilemmas, and we need talented and creative people, willing to change the world for the better. Every problem can be approached from multiple angles, and thus different perceptions on how to address problems can lead to a vast array of unique solutions. Sometimes, these proposed solutions can conflict, causing dilemmas.

A dilemma describes a situation that occurs when suggested decisions do not lead to a desired result. Dilemmas often are perceived as a paradox and, normally, there is no right or wrong decision, as both of the opportunities have negative effects. In regards to this social policy, Rittel & Webber already pointed out the difficulties of answering social problems in 1973:

“The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are "wicked" problems, whereas science has developed to deal with "tame" problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about "optimal solutions" to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers.” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 155)

Furthermore, they point out that decisions made cannot easily be reversed, as “every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemmas” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 163).

Spotting talented students who show a great desire to learn and who can wrap themselves around wicked problems can be difficult. Handing in a writing assignment based on a dilemma can help find those talented students. You can find some suggestions for dilemmas on the assignment sheet, but surely there are some questions around your own scientific topic which can be transported into a likewise dilemma.

You will also find a discussion guideline on how to use the answers given within your class.

### Develop Personally

When talking about talented and motivated students, they also show different perspectives on their own learning path and biography. They show a strong openness to curiosity, originality and creativity (Miller & Speirs Neumeister, 2017, p. 317 referring to Coaste & McCrae, 1992; Davis et al., 2010). Additionally, they show higher self-concepts (Spisak & Squires, 2016).

These qualities can be visible during class, but as students enrolled in Honors can also be more introverted (Achterberg 2005, p. 78 referring to Palmer & Wohl, 1972), they might not be spotted. Giving them the opportunity to hand in a writing assignment about their personal development can be an opportunity to identify such students.

Those questions can be about reflecting on your own learning biography and the academic path you went on, but can also be about the future. There are already questions on the assignment sheet, which can be used or added to your own suggestions.

## Use your Talent

Students enrolled in Honors often show a higher interaction with their department, teachers and outside university (g. e. Achterberg, 2005; Scager et al., 2012; Buckner et al., 2016). In particular, engagement in co-curricular activities often cannot be perceived inside classroom activities. Giving talented students the opportunity to write an assignment around questions of how to use their talent for society can help to spot those active students.

Especially as they are “heavily encouraged to take part in experiential learning through internships, studying abroad, leadership roles, and faculty-directed research” (Plominski & Burns, 2017, p.18).

The questions on the assignment sheet can also be connected or expanded regarding special research questions inside your own department or class.

## References

Achterberg, Cheryl (2005): What is an Honors Student? In: Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council 170 (Spring/Summer), p. 75–84.

Buckner, Ellen; Shores, Melanie; Sloane, Michael; Dantzler, John; Shields, Catherine; Shader, Karen; Newcomer, Bradley (2016): Honors and Non-Honors Student Engagement: A Mode of Student, Curricular, and Institutional Characteristics. In: Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 191–217.

Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). Revised NEO Personality Inventory manual. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Davis, G., Rimm, S., & Siegle, D. (2010). Education of the gifted and talented (6th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

Leutner, Detlev; Leopold, Claudia (2003): Selbstreguliertes Lernen als Selbstregulation von Lernstrategien - Ein Trainingsexperiment mit Berufstätigen zum Lernen aus Sachtexten. In: Unterrichtswissenschaft Vol. 31, p. 38–56.

Leutner, Detlev & Leopold, Claudia (2002). Der Einsatz von Lernstrategien in einer konkreten Lernsituation bei Schülern unterschiedlicher Jahrgangsstufen. In: Zeitschrift für Pädagogik (Beiheft 45), p. 240-258.

Miller, Angie L. & Speirs Neumeister, Kristie L. (2017). The Influence of Personality, Parenting Styles, and Perfectionism on Performance Goal Orientation in High Ability Students. In: Journal of Advanced Academics Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 313-344.

Palmer, A. B., & Wohl, J. (1972). Some personality characteristics of honors students. College Student Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 106-111.

Plominski, Abigail P.; Burns, Lawrence R. (2017): An Investigation of Student Psychological Wellbeing. Honors Versus Nonhonors Undergraduate Education. In: Journal of Advanced Academics Vol. 29, No. 1, p. 5–28. DOI: 10.1177/1932202X17735358.

Rittel, Horst W. & Webber, Melvin M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. In: Policy Sci 4 (22), p. 155-169. DOI: 10.1007/BF01405730

Scager, Karin; Akkerman, Sanne F.; Keesen, Fried; Tim Mainhard, M.; Pilot, Albert; Wubbels, Theo (2012): Do honors students have more potential for excellence in their professional lives? In: High Educ Vol. 64, No. 1, p. 19–39. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-011-9478-z.

Spisak, Art L. & Squires, Suzanne Carter (2016). The Effect of Honors Courses on Grade Point Averages. Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2016). In: p.103-114.



## Writing Assignment Tool (WAT)

### Introduction

In regards to the question of how to spot motivated students who show a great desire to learn and who can wrap themselves around wicked problems, writing assignments can be a way to show the teacher your personal talent and motivation. Therefore, it is your choice to hand in an essay answering the dilemma given. A dilemma describes a situation in which both suggested decisions do not lead to a desired result. Dilemmas are often perceived as a paradox and, normally, there is no right or wrong decision, as both of the opportunities have negative effects. Due to this, there is no wrong or right, no fixed solution that is expected within your essay. Still, there are some requirements you should be aware of when writing the essay.

### Requirements for the writing assignment

- Your essay should be no longer than 5 pages.
- If quotations are used, there must be a reference list.
- You can hand in your essay in English as well as in the National Language
- Do not exceed the deadline given



## Solve Dilemmas

Coming up, you will be given a dilemma. Think about what to choose or how to react within the opportunities given. Outline your choice and the consequences of it and explain why you did not choose otherwise.

Try to find another example of a similar dilemma and see if your choice would follow the same direction and why.

Explain how underlying questions of the dilemma can be found in problems within your academic discipline.

### Dilemma 1) Chicken Game

Two rulers of famous countries are on the brink of war. One has to withdraw, otherwise both will start war. But the one who's going to withdraw loses their reputation. If no one withdraws, both have shown their power and "won", but do not gain any benefit for their countries as they are in war for a long time, ruining their economies, society's life and infrastructure. Additionally, it is not sure who will win the war and if the rulers will remain as rulers in the aftermath.

### Dilemma 2) Stag Hunt

Two individuals go out on a hunt. Each one has to choose individually to hunt a stag<sup>[1]</sup> or to hunt a hare. None of the players know the choice of the other. If they are going to hunt a stag, they need the cooperation of their partner to be successful. But an individual can also get a hare by themselves. A hare is worth less than a stag.

## Develop Personally

Next, you will be given a question about your personal development. Write an essay in which you answer the following questions:

- 1) Using your personal competencies, how would you like to change the world and why?
- 2) Using your own experiences, what advice would you give your teenage self and why?
- 3) What is your passion in life?
- 4) Who would you like to be 5, 10 or 20 years from now?

## Use your Talent

Write an essay answering at least one of the up following questions.

- 1) How do you plan to make use of your education?
- 2) What do you consider to be the most urgent problem facing humanity and why?
- 3) Do you think the government should fund research?

## Guidelines for Discussions on Dilemmas

Based on the essays, it can be interesting to have a discussion on the dilemma given.

### 1) Clarification

The Dilemma will be read aloud and explained in detail. Leading questions are “Is there a problem at all? Why? What makes the dilemma a dilemma and why is it difficult to find a good solution?”

### 2) First Vote

The students within your class (no matter if they handed in an assignment or not) will spontaneously pick a position or solution they would prefer. This vote can also be anonymous.

### 3) Arguments

During this phase arguments for one of the possible solutions are listed. It is possible to give the students a kick-start using the extracted arguments found in the essays. Groups can be split up by positions chosen (if not anonymous) or by chance. The arguments listed should be prepared to be discussed in phase 4.

### 4) Discussion

Each of the groups will present their arguments and position, discussing with the others the pros and cons. Depending on the group, this discussion can be open or more structured (for example, after every argument of one group or the other group has the opportunity to directly address this argument with a contra argument – Ping-Pong Method).

### 5) Second Vote

Students again vote for a position/solution.

### 6) Reflection

Reflection on the discussion process follows in phase 6. Further connections to the topic/field of the course or other issues relevant can be drawn.



## Guidelines Self-Construction of Dilemmas

If you do not want to use a dilemma proposed you can also create your own dilemma, one which is best fitting to the topic of the course or the field of study. First you should decide which kind of dilemma you want to create.

### Relevant definitions

- Moral Dilemma: Choice between two behaviors which are against your own moral principles. There is no third option.
- Semi-realistic moral dilemma: Predicament of a hypothetical person who has to choose between two reactions, which are against her/his own moral principles.
- Educational moral dilemma: A dilemma which is used to get participants of a dilemma discussion to think about moral solutions and develop their judgment and discussion competences in a group and as an individual.

Depending on your choice the dilemma should be meaningful and offer plenty of different arguments and views on the two set actions proposed. Therefore, it can be wise to search for arguments on your own or ask colleagues about their perspectives. Hereby, you can already test the dilemma on practicability before handing it out to your students. Additionally, the following requirements can help when creating a dilemma.

### Requirements of a useable dilemma

The dilemma...

- should inherit only two possible solutions,
- should rely on a realistic or hypothetical problem, which is attractive to discuss and think about,
- can relate to your own field of study / course,
- should be short and simple to understand,
- should address moral or ethical perceptions,
- should not evoke hate/fear or other negative emotions.

## Examples of study field connected dilemmas

### Educational Sciences

You are a student in your last year who just finished the bachelor degree. Shortly after your graduation, you are in the position to choose between two options:

- a) a very well paid job, but which mostly involves boring and redundant activities
- b) a job that involves your talent and interests, but which is very low paid

### Entrepreneurship

The local elections are coming up. The mayor of a metropolitan European city was contacted by international entrepreneurs with the plan of hosting a new event which will attract a lot of new visitors and tourists. The entrepreneurs play a big role in funding this project. The event will bring in a lot of money and good credit for the city, since it's such a big happening.

However, the inhabitants of the city are not so happy with these new plans, because of the increasing number of people. This has a negative impact on traffic, sound level and cultural atmosphere.

Should the mayor a) listen to entrepreneurs and host the event or should they b) listen to their inhabitants and cancel it? There is only one option to choose. What would you do?

### Geography / spatial planning

You are a housing expert in a big city and are assigned the task of redeveloping a run-down area near the city center. This area consists of ugly flat blocks with small apartments and very outdated facilities. They are rented out by a social housing agency, mainly to poor citizens who have lived in these flats for decades and form a tight-knit community. New fire safety regulations will come into force from next year. Then the current buildings will not be considered safe anymore and people will no longer be allowed to live in them. The budget allocated for redevelopment permits only two options:

- a) Complete demolition of the old flat blocks. Then in the same spot new apartments will be built, mostly consisting of houses that are sold instead of rented out. A small part of the new apartments will be rented out, but for higher rent than at this moment. Only a limited number of original residents will be able to afford to return in the neighborhood after the redevelopment.
- b) Intense renovation of the old apartment blocks. After renovation, the rent will need to go up considerably for all apartments. Only a limited number of original residents will be able to afford to return to the neighborhood after the redevelopment.

It is not possible to get a higher budget. One of the options must be chosen now.

What option do you choose and why?

### Pharmaceutical sciences

Imagine you are a CEO of a pharmaceutical company that develops medicine for rare diseases. The development of the medicine costs the company millions. What do you do as CEO:

- a) You develop the medicine at the cost of firing your employees.
- b) You do not develop the medicine and let the patients die.





### Physics / Engineering

Dilemma: CO<sub>2</sub> or nuclear waste? There is a huge focus on climate change, which is largely caused by CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions. One often suggested solution is the use of nuclear power resources.

We hope to have solutions for stable sustainable energy sources in about 30 years and maybe even for cleaner nuclear power.

But what should we do for those next 30 years until the solutions might be ready?

Should we:

- a) build nuclear power plants or
- b) keep producing energy by burning fossil fuels?

What would you choose? Only one of the two options are possible.

### Teacher Training

A teacher has to decide on the destination of a class trip. There is a handicapped child in the class which has to use a wheelchair and additionally there are some children with a difficult socio-economic background.

There are only two options for the class trip:

- a) They visit a rock-climbing center nearby the school
- b) They visit an interactive museum in a city further away

If the teacher chooses the climbing garden the child in the wheelchair will not be able to attend, but, when choosing the interactive museum some of the poorer children will not be able to attend due to the lack of money. There are no other options than to choose one out of the two. What should the teacher do? Decide on one of the two options.

A university wants to expand its course program and therefore asks the students which course they would like to add to the program. Course A focuses on the needs of gifted pupils in school while course B focuses on the needs of disadvantaged children in school. Both of the courses' content are highly useable for the teacher training students, and an equal number of pupils would benefit from the knowledge and experiences gained during the course. The university decides to use a survey to ask the students for their opinion, but both of the options are equally voted for. There is no option that both the courses could be offered to the students. Which program should be picked?

- a) course A - focus on gifted pupils' needs
- b) course B - focus on disadvantaged childrens' needs