

Writing Center Consortium

for Graduate-level PME



Faculty Workshop Series 2021

Quality Assignments, Quality Writing:

Improving Writing Assignment Design

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Objectives

- Understand the confluence of factors that shape and influence writing assignment design success
- Recognize and resolve misalignment or contradicting factors of an assignment design
- Finish the workshop with a revised or developing writing assignment

Key Considerations for Assignment Design

- Curriculum and Program goals and outcomes
- Course goals and outcomes
 - Skills in sequence within the course and relative to program
- Rhetorical and Writing skills
 - Genre and Length
 - Conventions and style
 - Authentic or academic
- Knowledge areas
 - Specific methods of analysis and processes (processes to include development of assignment and application of writing skills)
 - Types of knowledge: hard science, soft science, humanities, etc.
- Assignment Process and Product
 - Long term (multiple deliverables) versus short term (single or “one-off” deliverables)
 - Informal (blog, journal, discussion board) versus formal (essay, project, group project)

Comparison of Prompts and Designed Assignments

Generic

Write about the utilization of air power in the Vietnam War.

Was air power valuable in the Vietnam War?

Ideal

The Vietnam War provides lessons for strategists today. What lessons do you believe are most relevant today? Explain why the lessons are important, provide specific examples from the War, and explain why the lessons are relevant today.

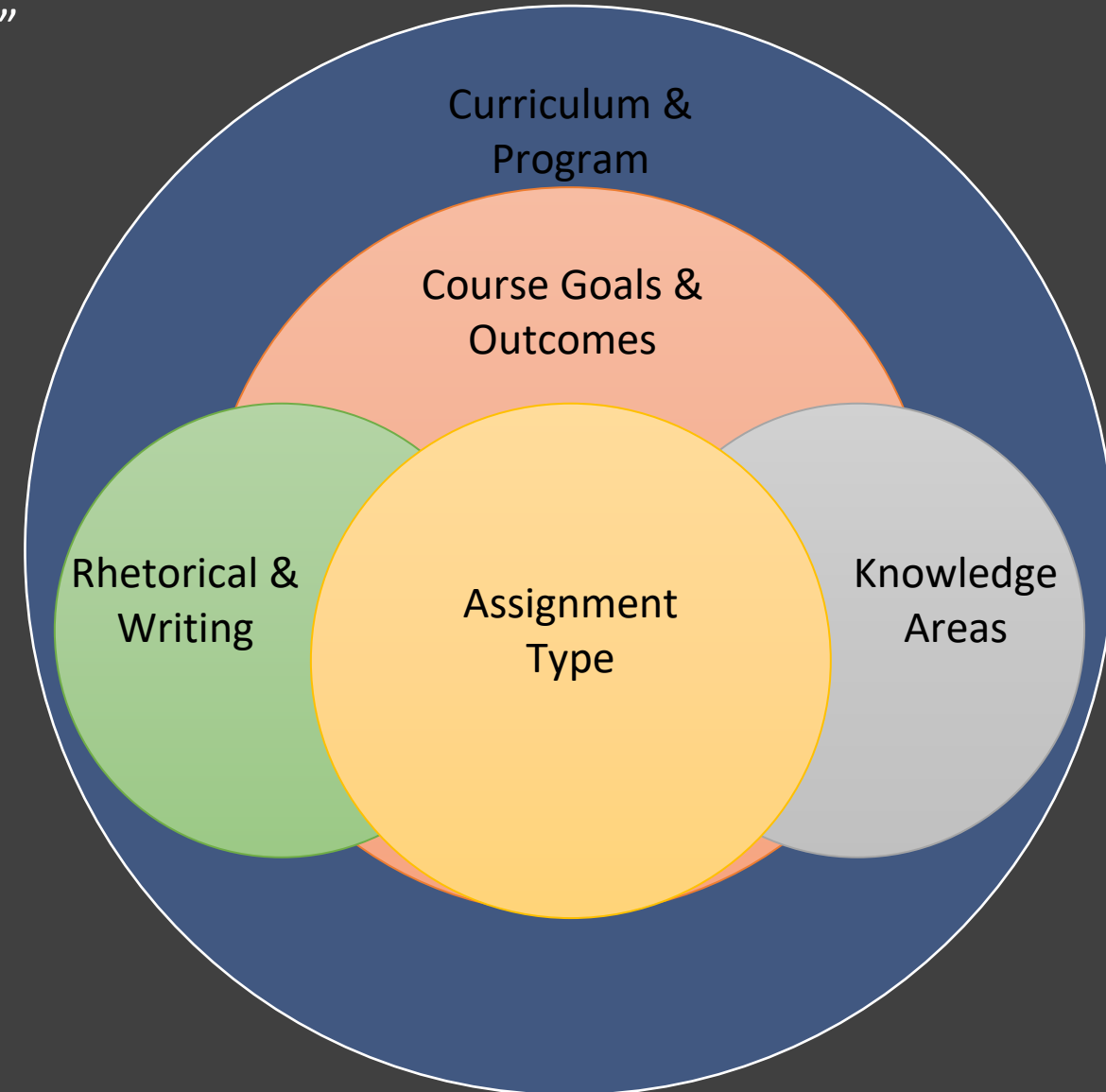
Constrained

The course has studied the fifteen primary factors for the cause of US failures in the Vietnam War. In three pages or less, identify the fifteen factors, explain their relevance, and provide examples.

Generic Assignment Prompt

“Write about the utilization of air power in the Vietnam War.”

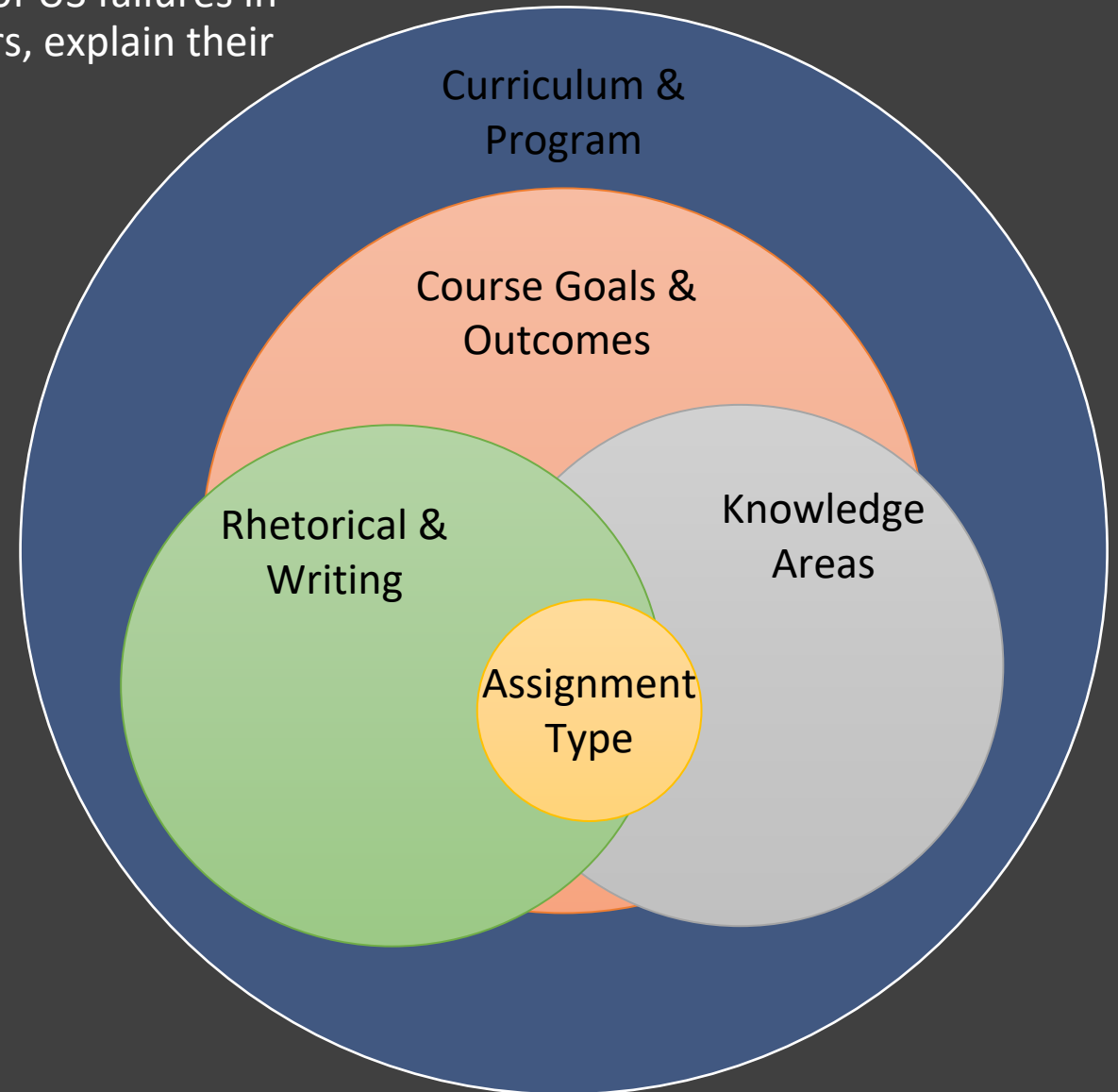
- Curriculum and Program goals and outcomes
 - A student prepared to influence and resolve national security problems using joint capabilities.
- Course goals and outcomes
 - Demonstrate proficiency in determining and applying air power to conflicts
- Rhetorical and Writing skills
 - Genre: essay
 - Length: 5-6 pages
 - Authentic or academic: academic
 - Writing Skills: summary
- Knowledge areas
 - Methods of analysis: analyze use of air power in conflict
 - Types of knowledge: humanities
- Assignment Process and Product
 - Single deliverable: short term
 - Product: academic



Constrained Assignment Prompt

“The course has studied the fifteen primary factors for the cause of US failures in the Vietnam War. In three pages or less, identify the fifteen factors, explain their relevance, and provide examples.”

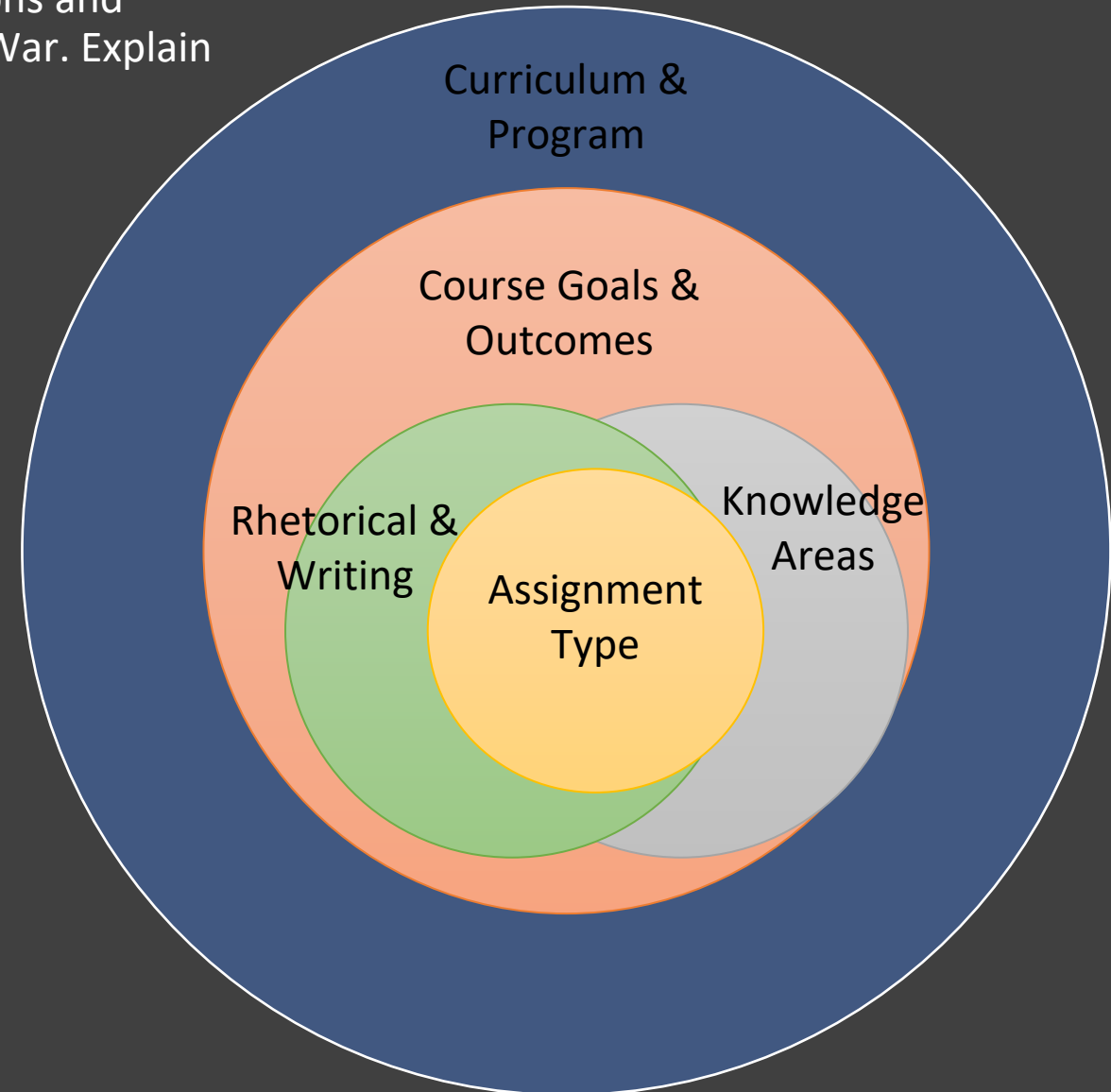
- Curriculum and Program goals and outcomes
 - A student prepared to influence and resolve national security problems using joint capabilities.
- Course goals and outcomes
 - Demonstrate proficiency in applying historical knowledge to employment of force during or preceding conflicts
- Rhetorical and Writing skills
 - Genre: academic essay
 - Length: 3 pages
 - Authentic or academic: academic
 - Writing Skills: concision
- Knowledge areas
 - Specific methods: analysis regurgitation of identified factors
 - Types of knowledge: humanities
- Assignment Process and Product
 - Single deliverable: short term
 - Product: Academic



Ideal Assignment Design

“The Vietnam War provides lessons for strategists today. What lessons do you believe are most relevant today? Identify the most important lessons and discuss why they are important, using specific examples from the War. Explain why the lessons are relevant today.”

- Curriculum and Program goals and outcomes
 - A student prepared to influence and resolve national security problems using joint capabilities.
- Course goals and outcomes
 - Demonstrate proficiency in applying historical knowledge to employment of force during or preceding conflicts
- Rhetorical and Writing skills
 - Genre: academic essay
 - Length: 5-6 pages
 - Authentic or academic: academic
 - Writing Skills: use of sources, organization of analysis/paragraphing
- Knowledge areas
 - Methods of analysis and process: analysis of historical events and pattern identification in contemporary conflict
 - Types of knowledge: humanities
- Assignment Process and Product
 - Single deliverable: short term
 - Product: academic



Assignment Development

- Over the next few slides, we'll ask you to develop content for your assignment
- Then, we will break out into two smaller groups for final compilation
- We'll come back to the main room for final discussion

Program and Course: Goals and Outcomes

- When will the assignment be due?
 - How does the assignment due date align with or correspond to the instruction, particularly in terms of the writing skills?
- Upon successful completion of the assignment, what skills will the student have demonstrated?
- What instruction has supported or helped develop the skills in the course?
- Relative to the broader curriculum and the course lessons, how does the course introduce, scaffold/reinforce, or advance skills from previous courses?
- What skills and knowledge can a graduate from your program demonstrate or perform?

10 minutes

Aligning Rhetorical and Knowledge Skills 1

- Genre and knowledge analysis
- What genre does your assignment employ?
 - Does the assignment require specific genre knowledge, i.e. a position paper or talking points memo?
 - Do you mean the assignment to “show the student’s work” or are you asking them to show the results of the work? (Some genres obscure the process of analysis and only ask for answers.)

10 minutes

Aligning Rhetorical and Knowledge Skills 2a

- Audience and conditioned rhetorical spaces
- Academic work exists in a conditioned rhetorical space
 - a conditioned rhetorical space is a situation in which the instructor tries to create or stands in for a more authentic rhetorical situation or the instructor directs the student to write to a reader with a specific level of knowledge
 - a specific level of knowledge is framed relative to the moment in the course, and
 - the contextual and framing information is embedded in those contexts
- How might you explain the context to a student?
- How might you frame the assignment relative to the course?
- What are specific guidelines the students can use to cue into “how a reader with a specific level of knowledge” understands what the writer means?

15 minutes

Aligning Rhetorical and Knowledge Skills 2b

- Audience and style
 - Audience and style are often assumed in professional genres
 - Assignments go awry when the material prescribes one set of style conventions that don't meet the same genre conventions
- Who are the students writing to?
- What are the conventions and expectations of that audience?
 - Relative to the genre and the context
 - familiar knowledge/information vs information that requires further explanation
- Do the expectations match the genre or create confusion?
 - Are you overlaying academic requirements, citations for a professional genre?
 - Are you asking students to write an authentic assignment in which they demonstrate mastery of academic conventions?

15 minutes

Aligning Rhetorical and Knowledge Skills 3

- Process and Product
- What is the process and product?
 - Does it require multiple deliverables?
 - Engaging in a series of processes?
 - If so, what steps does each deliverable require?
 - Does the step require specific instruction?
 - Does the step require progression of skill development in sequence and scaffolding?
 - If a student fails a previous deliverable, does the policy allow revision to ensure they don't suffer double-indemnity?
- What are the stakes of the assignment?
 - Do assignments in sequence or assignments with scaffolding progress from low-stakes to high stakes?

10 minutes

Finalizing the Assignment (Breakout Groups) 1

- Contextualizing/Framing
 - Reference the materials and classroom discussion, e.g. “Over the course of the class we have read about or discussed X, Y, and Z.”
 - Ask the direct question or make the direct statement
 - Careful of the difference between prompts and assignments
 - Offer the steps to imply organization
 - If it is an authentic assessment, consider the importance of rhetorical context
 - Set aside class time to discuss at least a week before the assignment is due
- Account for and direct the student regarding analysis or a derivative genre

Finalizing the Assignment (Breakout Groups) 2

- Formatting/Presentation
 - Use the white space on the page to highlight elements
 - Limit typographical changes to only the most important things (even more important for digital environments)
 - Due dates
 - Where to submit (LMS or email or . . .)
 - Style and citation requirements
 - Consider including a summary of requirements somewhere on the assignment

Discussion and Closing

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