

Assignment Design

Designing effective writing assignments requires careful planning, but the effort pays off in well-written student papers! Assignments need to have a purpose in your curriculum. They should contribute to fulfilling the goals of the course. Each assignment should build on previous assignments and lay a foundation for the ones to come.

Carefully written assignment prompts establish the parameters of the assignment without constraining individuals' thinking or creativity. Because they are specific to your course, students will be less likely to plagiarize. Assign writing *in writing* to avoid confusion or misinterpretations.

Well-developed assignment prompts include:

- Purpose of the assignment
- Audience for the assignment
- Specific writing task(s)
- Stylistic/formatting information (e.g., preferred citation style).
- Resources available to students (e.g., preparatory writing useful for this assignment, readings, library databases)
- Grading criteria/value of this paper in relation to the course
- Deadline (including opportunities for revision)

Organize and develop the assignment prompt in a top-down manner, giving space and attention to requirements in proportion to what you expect in the students' writing. For example, if you devote most of the prompt to stylistic information, you are communicating that style is most important when, in fact, you may be more concerned about the strength of an argument.

Likewise, as you write the prompt, establish the tone that you expect students to assume as they write.

If possible, provide students with a model (example) of previous student work and a checklist or grading rubric that you will use to evaluate the assignment.

Questions to Consider as You Design Writing Assignments

(Adapted from Richard L. Larson, *Writing in the Academic and Professional Disciplines: A Manual for Faculty*. Herbert H. Lehman College-CUNY, 1983.)

- How does the assignment relate to the discipline?
- How typical is this assignment of work in this discipline?
- How does this assignment contribute to learning in the field?
- How will the individual assignment build into the overall plan for the semester?
- What course content or goal does this assignment support?

Begin with assignments that demand fundamental intellectual activities (describing, explaining) and then write those that demand more complex intellectual activities (analyzing, critiquing, comparing).

Why is the student being asked to write the paper?

- What cognitive / conceptual activities are necessary?
- Will it interest the student?
- Will it interest you?
- Will the student acquire new knowledge?
- Is the task clearly defined?
- Do you know the parameters of desirable responses?
- Do students know? (How much should they know and when?)
- Is the basis for evaluation clear to the students?
- How broad or narrow do you want the scope of the topic to be?
- What do you want the assignment to yield?

Do you want students to...

- Re-state information?
- Describe a concept?
- Explain an idea?
- Analyze an argument?
- Evaluate an argument?
- Critique a viewpoint?
- Compare various theories?
- Argue one side or another?

What words would best convey what you want the students to do? **Verbs are crucial:** *describe, summarize, argue, compare, analyze, explain, evaluate, critique*, etc. But other words are important too: *theory vs. argument vs. concept vs. opinion vs. view*.

How explicit do you want to be about where you want them to get the information they use? Should they base their responses on the lectures, the textbook, library research, or a combination of these?

Does the student have access to the resources necessary for success on this assignment? If students are writing a research-based paper, do they understand and know how to use the required documentation style?