

Good Assignments: a How-to Guide

One of the most common college-level assignments goes something like this: "Ten page library research paper on a topic of your choice, due on the last day of classes." While most writing assignments are not as vague as this one, many create more difficulty for students than is necessary. A bit of care taken with the design of the assignment sheet can produce better papers that are easier to read and easier to grade. Define the task carefully when planning a writing assignment; first ask yourself how the assignment will integrate with the rest of the course. What do you want students to learn? How does the assignment serve the objectives of the course? Is it designed to demonstrate content mastery, to teach disciplinary practices and procedures, or both? A writing assignment can be a learning tool as well as an evaluation method.

It is also important to think carefully about exactly what you want them to do, and make sure that the language of your assignment clearly and unambiguously defines that task. Look carefully at the words, and ask yourself if there is anything in the assignment that would allow students to avoid the task and do something else. Vague or contradictory words often lead to inappropriate responses.

Make the Process Explicit

The process or steps necessary to complete the writing assignment may need to be made explicit. Researchers have found that students use the assignment sheet as a recipe, keeping it in front of them as they compose. They see the assignment sheet as explicit, step-by-step instructions for completing the task and interpret it very literally. Are the steps of the assignment clearly presented? Is the order of the activities a workable one?

Define the Writer's Role

The role the writer is to play in the situation is often a crucial part of the assignment. Without clear guidance, students often take up either a "text-processing" role, in which they synthesize material from different sources without responding to it, or the role of the "street-corner debater," who argues propositions from his or her own personal experience and judgement, without sources or professional vocabulary. The most appropriate role is often that of a "professional-in-training" who utilizes the perspective and conceptual tools of the discipline.

Define the Audience

Related to the question of the writer's role in the situation is the question of audience — for whom are they writing? Students often write for the instructor, but they feel that the instructor already knows all the material anyway, so they have trouble deciding what to leave in and what to leave out. Defining a hypothetical audience for the writing, and helping students understand the expectations of that audience, will help students make these decisions.

Use a Real-World Model

Many of the problems mentioned above can be solved if the writing task is modeled on a professional, real-world task. Research papers and other common academic assignments often have no real audience other than the instructor, and no purpose other than demonstrating that certain material has been covered. Reports, memos, articles, and instructions have real or potentially real audiences and purposes, and thus are easier to teach and easier to write.

Another solution is to provide a model or sample of what the finished product should look like. Even a quick glance at a representative sample can clear up a lot of confusion.

Provide Evaluation Criteria

Finally, think about how you are going to evaluate the finished product. What are your criteria? Will your criteria allow you to make clear distinctions when assigning grades? Will your students understand your decisions? Students need to know how much emphasis you will place on such things as focus, organization, format, grammar, punctuation, critical thinking, logic, evidence, and use of sources.

Further Reading

Two books that provide further insights into assignment design and how students go about writing tasks are: *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*, by Barbara Walvoord, and *Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines* by Barbara Walvoord and Lucille McCarthy.