**Creating Assignments**

Here are some general suggestions and questions to consider when creating assignments. There are also many other resources in print and on the web that provide examples of interesting, discipline-specific assignment ideas.

**Consider your learning objectives.**

What do you want students to learn in your course? What could they do that would show you that they have learned it? To determine assignments that truly serve your course objectives, it is useful to write out your objectives in this form: I want my students to be able to \_\_\_\_. Use active, measurable verbs as you complete that sentence (e.g., compare theories, discuss ramifications, recommend strategies), and your learning objectives will point you towards suitable assignments.

**Design assignments that are interesting and challenging.**

This is the fun side of assignment design. Consider how to focus students’ thinking in ways that are creative, challenging, and motivating. Think beyond the conventional assignment type! For example, one American historian requires students to write diary entries for a hypothetical Nebraska farmwoman in the 1890s. By specifying that students’ diary entries must demonstrate the breadth of their historical knowledge (e.g., gender, economics, technology, diet, family structure), the instructor gets students to exercise their imaginations while also accomplishing the learning objectives of the course (Walvoord & Anderson, 1989, p. 25).

**Double-check alignment.**

After creating your assignments, go back to your learning objectives and make sure there is still a good match between what you want students to learn and what you are asking them to do. If you find a mismatch, you will need to adjust either the assignments or the learning objectives. For instance, if your goal is for students to be able to analyze and evaluate texts, but your assignments only ask them to summarize texts, you would need to add an analytical and evaluative dimension to some assignments or rethink your learning objectives.

**Name assignments accurately.**

Students can be misled by assignments that are named inappropriately. For example, if you want students to analyze a product’s strengths and weaknesses but you call the assignment a “product description,” students may focus all their energies on the descriptive, not the critical, elements of the task. Thus, it is important to ensure that the titles of your assignments communicate their intention accurately to students.

**Consider sequencing.**

Think about how to order your assignments so that they build skills in a logical sequence. Ideally, assignments that require the most synthesis of skills and knowledge should come later in the semester, preceded by smaller assignments that build these skills incrementally. For example, if an instructor’s final assignment is a research project that requires students to evaluate a technological solution to an environmental problem, earlier assignments should reinforce component skills, including the ability to identify and discuss key environmental issues, apply evaluative criteria, and find appropriate research sources.

**Think about scheduling.**

Consider your intended assignments in relation to the academic calendar and decide how they can be reasonably spaced throughout the semester, taking into account holidays and key campus events. Consider how long it will take students to complete all parts of the assignment (e.g., planning, library research, reading, coordinating groups, writing, integrating the contributions of team members, developing a presentation), and be sure to allow sufficient time between assignments.

**Check feasibility.**

Is the workload you have in mind reasonable for your students? Is the grading burden manageable for you? Sometimes there are ways to reduce workload (whether for you or for students) without compromising learning objectives. For example, if a primary objective in assigning a project is for students to identify an interesting engineering problem and do some preliminary research on it, it might be reasonable to require students to submit a project proposal and annotated bibliography rather than a fully developed report. If your learning objectives are clear, you will see where corners can be cut without sacrificing educational quality.

**Articulate the task description clearly.**

If an assignment is vague, students may interpret it any number of ways – and not necessarily how you intended. Thus, it is critical to clearly and unambiguously identify the task students are to do (e.g., design a website to help high school students locate environmental resources, create an annotated bibliography of readings on apartheid). It can be helpful to differentiate the central task (what students are supposed to produce) from other advice and information you provide in your assignment description.

**Establish clear performance criteria.**

Different instructors apply different criteria when grading student work, so it’s important that you clearly articulate to students what your criteria are. To do so, think about the best student work you have seen on similar tasks and try to identify the specific characteristics that made it excellent, such as clarity of thought, originality, logical organization, or use of a wide range of sources. Then identify the characteristics of the worst student work you have seen, such as shaky evidence, weak organizational structure, or lack of focus. Identifying these characteristics can help you consciously articulate the criteria you already apply. It is important to communicate these criteria to students, whether in your assignment description or as a separate [rubric or scoring guide](https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/rubrics.html). Clearly articulated performance criteria can prevent unnecessary confusion about your expectations while also setting a high standard for students to meet.

**Specify the intended audience.**

Students make assumptions about the audience they are addressing in papers and presentations, which influences how they pitch their message. For example, students may assume that, since the instructor is their primary audience, they do not need to define discipline-specific terms or concepts. These assumptions may not match the instructor’s expectations. Thus, it is important on assignments to specify the intended audience <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop10e.cfm> (e.g., undergraduates with no biology background, a potential funder who does not know engineering).

**Specify the purpose of the assignment.**

If students are unclear about the goals or purpose of the assignment, they may make unnecessary mistakes. For example, if students believe an assignment is focused on summarizing research as opposed to evaluating it, they may seriously miscalculate the task and put their energies in the wrong place. The same is true they think the goal of an economics problem set is to find the correct answer, rather than demonstrate a clear chain of economic reasoning. Consequently, it is important to make your objectives for the assignment clear to students.

**Specify the parameters.**

If you have specific parameters in mind for the assignment (e.g., length, size, formatting, citation conventions) you should be sure to specify them in your assignment description. Otherwise, students may misapply conventions and formats they learned in other courses that are not appropriate for yours.

**A Checklist for Designing Assignments**

Here is a set of questions you can ask yourself when creating an assignment.

**Have I...**

* Provided a written description of the assignment (in the syllabus or in a separate document)?
* Specified the purpose of the assignment?
* Indicated the intended audience?
* Articulated the instructions in precise and unambiguous language?
* Provided information about the appropriate format and presentation (e.g., page length, typed, cover sheet, bibliography)?
* Indicated special instructions, such as a particular citation style or headings?
* Specified the due date and the consequences for missing it?
* Articulated performance criteria clearly?
* Indicated the assignment’s point value or percentage of the course grade?
* Provided students (where appropriate) with models or samples?

Adapted from the WAC Clearinghouse at <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop10e.cfm>.

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<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html>

**Assignment Design: Checklist**

Careful planning and implementation of assignments will help your students produce what you expected. Consider using this checklist as a tool to trouble-shoot your assignment design and identify possible areas to refine. Other considerations may be required for your specific assignment, but this will give you a great start, no matter what type of assignment you plan to give.

**Stage one: Planning**

When planning the assignment, decide how it can

* Fit with main learning objectives for the course, term, and program
* Relate to previous work done in this course and past courses
* Be new and different from the type of assignments given in this course and other courses(e.g., seek alternatives to the proverbial term-paper or problem set)
* Benefit from an audience other than yourself (e.g., peers, community professionals, liaison librarian, politicians)
* Use current topics and current resources
* Be broken into a series of smaller assignments to avoid overwhelming students
* Be completed – in groups, pairs, or individually
* Be completed – in the online environment
* Build on students’ previous experience and current skill set
* Develop important skills for students, both for your course work and beyond (e.g., skills for the workplace, skills for life)
* Require a reasonable amount of work and be successfully completed in the allotted time, given other courses and demands outside of school
* Have value to you (e.g., will be interesting to grade, lead to a research project)
* Require a level of commitment you can meet (e.g., student support, grading)

Also, prepare by considering the support demands students may have

* Identify types of assistance students will require to complete the assignment
* Contact liaison librarian, community professionals, or other people who can assist you and your students in completing the assignment
* Arrange guest lectures relevant to assignment process (e.g., liaison librarian, community professional, colleagues)
* When possible, use class time for activities to help students complete the assignment (e.g., discuss how to write an annotated bibliography, run lab activities to demonstrate a requisite skill, discuss material related to assignment topic)
* Decide if students are required to meet with you or your teaching assistants (TAs) as they complete the assignment and set times and policies for availability to help students avoid procrastinating

Then, make evaluation decisions by choosing the

* Assignment length limitations and due dates
* Type of feedback to give – written, oral, anonymous
* Evaluators – you, peers, community professional, liaison librarian
* Type of grade required (e.g., check mark, pass/fail, numeric grade)
* Parts to evaluate – effort, research process, thinking process, progress, sequence of assignments, drafts, final products
* Weighting of components – how much is each part worth
* Turnaround times for marking to make the assignment meaningful for students
* Policies for possible problems – late or incomplete assignments, missed meetings, poor group work practices, plagiarism

**Stage two: Implementing**

Prepare an assignment description or handout that

* Comprises the key parts**–  situation** (background information, audience, relevance), **task** (what to do), **stages** (a timeline for completing key stages of the assignment), and **evaluation criteria** (specific grading scheme, special policies)
* Uses plain language – avoids jargon
* Provides advice from past experiences with the assignment
* Explains proper referencing and acceptable sources for information – be specific and expect to be taken literally

Have a colleague (preferably someone not familiar with your course) read the handout and identify any unclear instructions and jargon, then revise accordingly. As well, do your assignment before giving it to students whenever possible, so you can identify problems before they do. And when you distribute the handout in class, take time to discuss it and allow for questions and clarifications about the task.

Consider giving ongoing support

* Share useful student feedback with the class and TAs
* Keep in touch with support people (i.e., liaison librarian)
* Ask for mid-assignment feedback since no news is not necessarily good news
* Have a backup plan for areas identified as difficult to complete (i.e., if a document is hard to get, have a copy available for reserve) – but take care not to modify the assignment too much from the handout because this confuses students

And when the assignments are all submitted and returned

* List 5 strengths and 5 weaknesses of the assignment and suggest changes for next time
* Ask for evaluative feedback from students and support contacts – find out what worked well, what could be improved, where students had the most difficulty, and how you can better facilitate the process next time
* Use feedback and experiences to modify assignment plan for the next time

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