

Creating Effective Assignments

Some valuable ideas you'll find in this chapter

- Every assignment should help students achieve important learning goals.
- Aim for assignments that students find relevant and engaging.
- Ask yourself if students will learn significantly more from a 30-page assignment than a five-page assignment – enough to justify the additional time spent on it.
- Address plagiarism consistently and collaboratively throughout your college through education as well as ramifications.

The world's best critical thinking rubric is useless if it's used to assess only students' summaries of a concept. It's also useless if the guidelines given to students are so vague that students don't produce what faculty are hoping to see. Well-crafted assignments are thus an essential part of the assessment process. This chapter discusses the characteristics of a great assignment, how to construct assignment guidelines, and how to counter plagiarism.

What is a great assignment?

Great assignments have traits that research has shown help college students learn (List 26.1 in Chapter 26).

Great assignments consistently focus on important learning goals. The assignment guidelines given to students and the assessment criteria for completed assignments both focus on the same important learning goals (Winkelmes, Bernacki, Butler, Zochowski, Golanics, & Weavil, 2016).

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Performance Assessments and Traditional Assessments

Performance assessments ask students to demonstrate their skills rather than describe or explain those skills through traditional tests. Performance assessments have two components: assignment guidelines that tell students what they are expected to do or produce and assessment criteria – usually a rubric (Chapter 15 – used to assess completed work). Performance assessments are sometimes called *alternative assessments* because they are alternatives to traditional tests.

Traditional assessments are the kinds of tests that have been around for decades, if not centuries: multiple-choice and other objective tests, essay tests, and oral examinations. Students have historically completed traditional assessments in controlled, timed examination settings.

Great assignments are learning opportunities. Exams – whether multiple-choice, short-answer, or essay – are opportunities to assess but not opportunities for students to learn. Yes, students learn when they study for an exam, but the time they spend taking the exam is not time spent learning. The time students spend completing great assignments is time spent in active learning through performance assessments (see Jargon Alert).

Great assignments are meaningful and worthwhile. While quizzes, homework, and class discussions can give us insight on whether students are on track to achieve key learning goals, far more useful – both to us and to our students – are learning

activities that require significant time and effort. Capstones (Chapter 5) are excellent examples.

But make sure that the time students put into a major assignment yields an appropriate payoff in terms of their learning. Will students learn twice as much from an assignment that takes 10 hours of their time as from one that takes 5 hours?

Jargon Alert!**Authentic Assessments**

Authentic assessments ask students to complete messy real-world tasks with multiple acceptable solutions, rather than fabricated problems for which there is only one correct answer.

Great assignments mirror real-world experiences. Authentic assessments (see Jargon Alert) ask students to work on real-life tasks such as analyzing case studies with bona fide data, conducting realistic laboratory experiments, or completing field experiences. Try “You are there” scenarios: “You are an expert

chemist (statistician, teacher, anthropologist, etc.) asked to help with the following situation . . .”

Great assignments are relevant and engaging. They engage students by giving them hands-on practice rather than only listening to lectures or reading textbooks. Students find them interesting and worthwhile – something that responds to an issue they care about or that is relevant to their careers or lives. If you’re not sure how to make an assignment more interesting, ask your students! They often have great ideas.

Great assignments have challenging but realistic, attainable expectations. Often when students know exactly what they need to do to earn a high grade, they will rise to meet that standard, even if it means accomplishing things to which they never thought they could aspire. Ask students to demonstrate not just simple understanding but also thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Focusing on these kinds of skills makes the assignment more challenging, worthwhile, and interesting, and it promotes deeper learning.

Great assignments are varied. As discussed in Chapter 3, the greater your variety of student learning evidence, the more confidently you can infer how well students have learned what you want them to. Instead of assessing students solely through multiple-choice tests or solely through writing assignments, for example, assess them using a combination of tests, writing assignments, and other projects. One assignment might be a panel presentation, another could be a chart or diagram, and a third a written critique. Students might convey the essence of a novel’s protagonist through a diagram, video, or oral presentation rather than through a traditional essay. List 16.1 offers examples of assignments beyond the usual term paper or essay. Many of these assignments generate visual products that are faster to grade than traditional papers.

If you think your assignments are in a rut, or if you’re struggling to come up with learning activities for some learning goals, consider Learning Assessment Techniques (LATs) (see Jargon Alert). As you can see from the examples in

List 16.1 Examples of Assignments Beyond Essays, Term Papers, and Research Reports

- Abstract or executive summary
- Advertisement or commercial
- Annotated bibliography
- Biography or realistic fictional diary from a historical period
- Briefing paper
- Brochure or pamphlet
- Campaign speech
- Case study/analysis
- Client report
- Collaborative group activity
- Database
- Debate or discussion
- Debriefing interview preparation
- Dramatization of an event or scenario, in writing or a presentation
- Editing and revision of a poorly written paper
- Evaluation of opposing points of view or the pros and cons of alternative solutions to a problem
- Experiment or other laboratory experience
- Field notes
- Game invention
- Graph, chart, diagram, flowchart, or other visual aid
- Graphic organizer, taxonomy, or classification scheme
- Handbook or instructional manual
- Journal or log (Chapter 20)
- Learning Assessment Techniques (see Jargon Alert)
- Letter to an editor or business
- Model, simulation, or illustration
- Narrative
- News report on a concept or from a historical period
- Oral history recording of an event
- Plan to research and solve a problem
- Plan to conduct a project or provide a service
- Portfolio (Chapter 18)
- Poster, display, or exhibit
- Presentation, demonstration, or slideshow
- Proposal for and justification of a solution to a problem
- Reflection on what and how one has learned (Chapter 20)
- Review and critique of one's own work or that of a peer, a performance, an exhibit, a work of art, a writer's arguments, or how something could have been done better
- Selected portions of research paper (for example, only the problem statement and the review of literature)
- Survey (Chapter 20), including an analysis of the results
- Teaching a concept to a peer or child
- Video recording
- Website

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Learning Assessment Techniques (LATs)

Learning Assessment Techniques, or *LATs* (Barkley & Major, 2016), are learning activities organized around the six dimensions of L. Dee Fink's (2013) taxonomy of learning goals (Chapter 4).

Table 16.1, many LATs are relatively quick and engaging assignments. *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2016) offers practical suggestions on how to assess each LAT.

Great assignments fit the scope of the learning setting. Capstones (Chapter 5) are great learning and assessment opportunities in courses, programs, and significant co-curricular experiences such as service learning projects. Smaller, more focused

Table 16.1: Examples of Learning Assessment Techniques

Dimension of Learning	Example	Description
Foundational Knowledge	Entry Ticket	At the beginning of a class, students answer a brief question on an assigned reading on an index card or other medium.
Application	What's the Problem?	Students look at examples of common problem types (such as types of fallacies in arguments) and name the type of problem each example represents.
Integration	Concept Map	Students draw a diagram that is a network of ideas or concepts studied, with lines connecting related concepts.
Human Dimension	Dramatic Dialogues	Students create an imagined discussion of a problem or issue between two real or imaginary characters.
Caring	Three-Minute Message	In three minutes, students deliver a compelling argument supported with convincing details and examples.
Learning How to Learn	Student Generated Rubrics	Students use an exemplary model of student work (essay, lab report, work of art, and so on) to create a rubric (Chapter 15) articulating the key traits of effective work.

learning experiences call for simpler, shorter assignments and assessments such as the Learning Assessment Techniques discussed above.

Great assignments are clear to students. This is discussed in the next section.

Crafting effective assignments

Carefully crafted assignments are critical parts of the teaching/learning process because, regardless of what we state in syllabi or say in class, assignments are the most powerful way we communicate our expectations to students. Thoughtfully written assignment guidelines inspire students to give the assignment their best effort and thereby achieve the assignment's learning goals. With poorly written guidelines, students may complete an assignment without learning what we want them to learn.

Suppose, for example, that history faculty want students to be able to analyze the impact of a noteworthy individual on the outcome of World War II. They ask students to write a term paper on "a person involved with World War II" with no further guidance or direction. Some students might complete the assignment by only summarizing the life history of an individual, doing nothing to develop – or

demonstrate – their analysis skills. Faculty assessing the papers may find little evidence of analysis skill, not because students are poor at analysis but because the assignment never explicitly asked the students to analyze.

Mary-Ann Winkelmes (Berrett, 2015) offers an elegant framework for crafting effective assignments: Give students transparent information on the assignment’s task, purpose, and assessment criteria. Use the principles of backwards curriculum design (Chapter 5) to approach this: First articulate the assignment’s purpose, then its assessment criteria, and then the task.

Identify the assignment’s key learning goals. Begin by identifying the assignment’s purpose, which is its key learning goals: What you want your students to learn from the assignment. The assignment should focus students on those learning goals that you consider *most* important. If you are giving a writing assignment, for example, identify the specific kinds of writing skills that you most want students to strengthen.

Also take the time to articulate why those learning goals are important – how achieving them will help students, whether in their careers, in subsequent study, or in life. Some students learn more effectively when they see clear, practical benefit in what they are being asked to do.

Draft the rubric to be used to assess completed assignments. The rubric should reflect the assignment’s key learning goals and emphasize the most important traits of those goals.

It may strike you as curious that the rubric should be drafted before creating the assignment itself. Shouldn’t we first create the assignment and then the rubric? But think of planning a road trip. When we use a map or GPS to plot a route, we first locate our destination and then chart the most appropriate route to get there. When we teach, we are taking our students on a similar journey. Our assignments are more effective if we first clarify what we want students to learn from the assignment (the destination) and then design an assignment that will help them achieve those ends (the route to get there).

If this process differs from your experience and therefore seems daunting (“How can I possibly create grading criteria when I don’t know what I’m asking students to do?”), use an iterative process to create an assignment. First, list the assignment’s learning goals: The most important things you want students to learn by completing the assignment. Then draft rough ideas for the assignment itself. Next, use your ideas for the assignment to explicate your learning goals into rubric traits. Once you’ve spelled out the rubric traits and performance levels, clarify your assignment so it will elicit the work described in the rubric.

Craft the assignment guidelines. Give your students clear, written instructions that point them in the right direction. The clearer your guidelines, the better some

Jargon Alert!**Prompt**

A *prompt* is the guidelines for an assignment: The (usually written) statement or question that tells students what they are to do. Prompts are used to communicate virtually everything we ask students to do.

There are two basic kinds of prompts. *Restricted-response* prompts ask everyone to provide pretty much the same response, just in their own words. Mathematics problems, science laboratory assignments, and essay test questions are often restricted-response prompts.

Extended-response prompts give students latitude in deciding how to complete the assignment. Their completed assignments may vary considerably in organization, style, and content. Suppose that students are asked to speculate, with appropriate justification, on how our daily lives might be different today if the United States had never engaged in space exploration. The visions and supporting evidence in equally outstanding papers might vary a great deal.

students will do. An A assignment is a lot faster and easier to grade than a C or D assignment, so this is a win-win strategy: Your students work harder and learn more, and you spend less time grading (Walvoord & Anderson, 2010)!

The title of an assignment is a powerful way to convey to students what you want them to do (Walvoord & Anderson, 2010). Consider terms like *argumentative essay*, *original research project*, or *sociological analysis* that make the assignment clearer than the usual *term paper*. Begin the prompt with an introductory sentence that's an overview of what you want students to do and then answer the questions in List 16.2.

Match the length of the prompt to the scope of the assignment. Guidelines for major assignments such as portfolios or

term projects can run a page or more. Brevity is important, however, when you are asking for very short responses such as minute papers (Chapter 20) or when you are giving timed in-class assignments such as an essay exam. In these situations, every minute counts and time spent reading your directions is time that can't be spent thinking or responding.

Consider asking students to provide a written reflection on their completed assignment as discussed in Chapter 20.

Break large assignments into smaller pieces. Rather than distribute a major assignment on the first day of a course and collect it on the last day, break the assignment into pieces that are submitted or checked at various points during the course. You might ask students to submit first their research paper topic, then an annotated bibliography for it, then an outline of it, then a draft of it for peer review. This helps students manage their time and, more importantly, gets those heading in a wrong direction back on track before it's too late for them to salvage their project.

Scaffolding an assignment (see Jargon Alert) also makes your job of assessing the completed assignments easier because, as noted earlier, good work is faster and easier to assess than poor work. And, as discussed in the next section of this chapter, scaffolding can discourage plagiarism.

Jargon Alert!**Scaffolding**

Scaffolding is breaking an assignment into pieces or steps that are progressively challenging and giving students support as they work on each step of the process.

List 16.2 Questions to Address in a Prompt for an Assignment

- Why are you giving students this assignment?**
 - What is its purpose?
 - What do you expect students to learn by completing it?
 - How will it help prepare them to succeed in later courses, in the workplace, and/or in their lives?
- What skills and knowledge you want students to demonstrate?**
 - Explain terms that may be fuzzy to your students even if they are clear to you, such as *compare*, *evaluate*, and *discuss*.
 - Explicitly ask for the outcomes you're seeking. For example, if the rubric assesses the quality of arguments, explicitly ask students to make arguments that meet the rubric's traits.
 - Ask only for knowledge or skills that are listed on the rubric (Messick, 1994).
- What should the completed assignment look like?**
 - What should be included in the completed assignment?
 - Who is the (perhaps hypothetical) audience for the assignment: academicians, people working in a particular setting, or the general public?
 - How should students format the completed assignment?
 - If the assignment is to write or present something, what is an optimal length?
- How are students to complete the assignment?**
 - How much time do you expect them to spend on the assignment?
 - How do you expect them to focus their time and energy?
 - If this is a course assignment, how much will it count toward the final course grade?
 - What readings, reference materials, technologies, and other resources are they expected to use?
 - Can they collaborate with others? If so, to what extent?
- What are the deadlines for the assignment?**
- What assistance can you provide while they are working on the assignment?**
 - Are you willing to critique drafts, for example?
- How will you score or grade the assignment?**
 - The best way to communicate this is to give students the assignment's rubric (Howell, 2011).

Depending on your students' needs, the assignment's learning goals, and your time constraints, at these checkpoints you might:

- Simply check off that this portion of the project is complete or in progress.
- Review and comment on this portion of the project.
- Have student peers assess this portion of the project using a rubric that you provide.
- Give this portion of the project a tentative grade (pending subsequent revisions).

Can assignments be purposefully vague? While good prompts are often generous in the guidance they give to students, some faculty like to give purposefully vague assignments, because one of the things they want students to learn is how to figure out the assignment on their own. This practice can be fine, but *only if*:

- One of the learning goals of the assignment is to learn how to choose, define, or clarify a problem or issue; *and*
- Students have opportunities to learn and practice these kinds of skills before tackling the assignment; *and*
- This learning goal is reflected in the rubric used to assess the assignment.

Countering plagiarism

The work of others is so readily available today that student plagiarism is a growing concern. While there is no way to eliminate plagiarism, the strategies to counter plagiarism in List 16.3 (Carroll, 2004) may help.

List 16.3 Strategies to Counter Plagiarism

- **Use detection judiciously.**
 - After papers are turned in, ask students to summarize them.
 - Use online search engines to search for similar passages.
 - Interview students or ask them to write reflectively about the process they used to write the paper.
- **Review papers for the following:**
 - Out-of-character work
 - Abrupt changes in language, referencing systems, or vocabulary
 - Fully finished works with no evidence of research and writing processes
 - Anachronisms or only dated references
- **Explicitly teach and model academic rules, values, and conventions.**
 - Provide plenty of instruction, learning activities, and feedback that help students understand exactly what plagiarism and academic integrity are. Focus on what students should *do* rather than what they should *not* do. Test their understanding through realistic test questions and assignments on plagiarism.
 - Model academic integrity in your own examples, lectures, and discussions by citing the sources to which you refer.
- **Provide opportunities for students to learn, practice, and get feedback on research and writing skills** in your discipline.
- **Use fair assessment practices** (Chapter 3).
 - Give clear prompts that are plainly linked to key learning goals.
 - Vary the kinds of assignments you give, as discussed earlier in this chapter.
 - Give creative assignments that don't lend themselves to plagiarism. Assign oral or visual presentations rather than written papers; scaffold large assignments, as discussed earlier in this chapter; or give assignments that ask students to relate concepts learned to personal or local experiences.
- **Work with your colleagues to make a concerted and consistent effort to address plagiarism.**
 - Develop and implement appropriate and consistent policies for all students and programs.
 - Be consistent in how plagiarism policies are explained, applied, and enforced.
 - Provide timely, transparent, and defensible penalties.

For More Information

The DQP Assignment Library (www.assignmentlibrary.org) is a searchable online library of peer-reviewed course assignments addressing a broad range of learning goals in a variety of disciplines. It also offers additional readings on crafting assignments (www.assignmentlibrary.org/resources). *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses* (Fink, 2013) offers a model for aligning learning activities to key learning goals.

Time to think, discuss, and practice

1. Seaside College is designing a new first-year seminar to help its students develop the skills and dispositions they need to succeed in college. The faculty have decided that students need to learn how to evaluate information critically. Suggest an assignment that students in the seminar might complete to help them develop that skill.
2. Choose one of the following (poorly written!) prompts:
 - Compare the writing styles of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.
 - Compare the Republican and Democratic parties.
 - Describe the operation of a microscope.
 - Research the demographics of various ethnic groups in the United States.
 - Compare the strengths, weaknesses, and uses of quantitative and qualitative assessment.
 - a. Choose one person in your group to play the role of the faculty member who wrote the prompt. That person will answer your group's questions about the course or program for which the prompt was written and the learning goal(s) that the prompt is intended to assess.
 - b. Decide what makes the prompt ineffective.
 - c. Rewrite the prompt so it has the traits of good prompts.