

Designing Written Papers and Assignments

STEP 1. FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU WANT THIS ASSIGNMENT TO *DO*

Think about a written assignment you are currently planning to assign in your summer course and respond to the two prompts below:

A. What ideas do I currently have for this written assignment? By the end of this assignment, what do I want my students to be able to *do*?

B. Why am I asking my students to demonstrate their knowledge about this assignment through *writing* (versus an exam, presentation, or applied project)?

STEP 2. IDENTIFY YOUR LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT

A. What *content-based goals* do I have for my students related to this assignment? (ex. ability to explain connection between Stonewall Riots and modern-day Pride Week; ability to use theories of social constructionism to analyze current events)

B. What *process-based goals* do I have for my students related to this assignment? (ex. learning to support claims with primary source material, learning to translate their writing for a public audience; learning to write a research proposal or annotated bibliography)

Imagine that one of your students turned in an absolutely amazing, glowing, insightful assignment responding to this prompt. In this fantasy, what makes the paper so successful? What elements or features does it contain?

Now, write a few Learning Objectives for this written assignment. Just like with course-level Learning Objectives, make sure that your LOs are *specific, measurable, concise*. Also make sure that they *relate to your overall course objectives*. Remember to avoid words like “learn,” “know,” and “understand” in your LOs because those actions can’t be measured.

Through completing this written assignment, students will:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

STEP 3. DECIDE WHAT KIND OF ASSIGNMENT BEST ALIGNS WITH YOUR LOs

Given the Learning Objectives you wrote above, what type of writing assignment can best help your students achieve these objectives? A compare and contrast paper? A personal narrative essay? A research report? A media analysis? An op-ed? What’s your justification for this choice?

Given your Learning Objectives and goals for this assignment, does it make sense to have all your students *answer the same prompt using the same materials* or does it make sense to let students *choose their own topic, focus, or materials*? What’s your justification for this choice?

STEP 4. PREPARE TO WRITE A ROUGH DRAFT OF YOUR PROMPT

Before you write, consider the following questions:

Can I further scaffold this assignment?

- Can I get students thinking about and working on this assignment before the due date?
- Can I break the process down into smaller, lower-stakes steps?
- Can I provide feedback at an earlier, formative step in the process?
- Based on your Learning Objectives, does it make sense to give students credit for the writing process? (ex. for turning in a thesis, annotated bibliography, or rough draft)
- Will I need to explicitly teach skills associated with this writing assignment? (ex. how to use a library database, what an annotated bibliography is) If so, when will I fit this into my lesson plans?

Can I encourage or require revision?

- *If at all possible*, create opportunities for students to revise their work
- Grading revised work means that students' grades reflect *improvement* and *engagement with feedback*, rather than just preexisting writing skills
- If including revision is impossible in your course, require students to apply the feedback received on one paper to their next written assignment and *hold them accountable*

Can I create opportunities for metacognitive reflection?

- Students benefit from *metacognitive reflection* about their writing, or opportunities to think about how they are writing and why (Flower & Hayes 1981; Wardle 2007)
- Based on your learning objectives, does it make sense for students to also assess their own writing? (ex. write a cover letter explaining their writing choices and process, identify strengths and weaknesses in their own writing, ask for specific kinds of feedback from you)

Is my prompt aligned with my assessment criteria?

- What is my grading criteria? What will I be looking for in this assignment?
- Based on my Learning Objectives, what weight will I give to each of these elements?
- Are my grading criteria clear to me and to my students?

STEP 5: DRAFT (OR REVISE) A ROUGH DRAFT OF YOUR PROMPT

Consider including the following elements in your assignment prompt:

Heading

- Model the same attention to detail in your prompt that you want from your students
- Also, make it hard for students to *lose* or *overlook* this piece of paper

Context for Project

- **Broader significance of the project:** *Why* are you asking students to do this assignment or write about this topic? Are you asking them to weigh in on something that is hotly contested in your discipline? Do you want them to see how past historical events have

ongoing effects? What's the significance of this assignment and why should your students care about it in the bigger picture?

- **Context from the class:** What key words, concepts, or frameworks should students keep in mind as they approach this written assignment?

Learning Objectives

- Consider including your Learning Objectives in your prompt to help students prioritize their focus

Calendar + Key Dates

Clear Statement of Assignment

- **Question:** Do I have a clear question, phrased *as a question*, that I want students to address or respond to? If I have written multiple questions, is it clear which one(s) is the most important?
- **Evidence:** What should students use as evidence? Course readings? Scholarly sources from the library? Original social science research? Personal anecdotes? Quotes and observations from a piece of media?
- **Audience:** What audience should the writer target and what can they assume that audience already knows?

Rubric and/or Grading Expectations

- Even if you don't include a rubric for this assignment, help students understand which parts of the assignment are the most important (and therefore, have the biggest effect on their grade)

Hints, Tips, + Process Suggestions

- **Suggested step-by-step process:** What order of actions will help a student be successful on this assignment? What should they do first? *When* should they do it?
- **Things students should prioritize:** What are your own quirks, irks, and unspoken expectations as an instructor? Do you demand impeccable topic sentences? Do you find yourself angrily crossing out passive sentences? Do you *say* that there's no minimum number of sources, but actually get mad if students only include one quote from the textbook? Let students know what you value up front and, if appropriate, teach a mini-lesson about this skill in class to clarify your expectation.
- **Things students should avoid:** Can you anticipate ways a student might misinterpret this prompt? How can you keep students from transferring unhelpful knowledge from past assignments? (ex. all papers start with a personal anecdote as a hook).

Nitty Gritty Details

- **Submission details:** What day and time is this assignment due? Where should it be submitted? Do you prefer digital or hardcopy submission (or both)?
- **Length requirements:** How long should this paper be (in pages or word count)? Is it single or double-spaced? What font, font size, and margins are expected?

- **Citation Style:** What citation styles are accepted? It may be useful to explicitly state that you expect a Works Cited or References page.
- **Additional Requirements:** Do you want students to include any additional components with their final submission (ex. include a cover page, attach a printed copy of the rubric, include their rough drafts with comments)? Will you be asking them to do any reflective writing about this assignment, either in class or at home? If so, what will that look like?
- **Resources:** Do you want students to visit CLAS for help? Do you want them to consult Purdue OWL or some other online resource? Are you planning to provide model papers or sample thesis statements?

STEP 6. CHECK YOUR PROMPT FOR CLARITY

Check that your prompt actively works to combat these common issues that students have with writing prompts:

1. Students misplace their assignment sheet, can't easily access it, or have contradictory or incomplete information between their assignment sheet and the in-class explanation
2. Students haven't read through the whole prompt or haven't read it closely enough
3. Students can't identify the key question or focus of the assignment because the prompt is too short, too long, or doesn't actually ask a clear question
4. Students don't know the definition of the key action verbs they are asked to do (ex. *synthesize* versus *analyze*).
5. Students extrapolate from other writing contexts (ex. everything is a 5-paragraph essay)

Have a peer read your prompt to see if it stands on its own without in-person explanation or clarification. Check specifically for the following elements:

Description of project: Do you call this assignment a research paper? An analytical essay? A reading response? Keep in mind that these have very loaded and often very conflicting meanings for students. Be clear about what *you* mean by the term you use.

Verbs: Do I include active verbs that clarify what students should do in this paper? (ex. “**Write an analysis** of *Macbeth*” → “**Analyze** *Macbeth*”) If you're not sure whether students will understand the verb you use, consider choosing a different phrasing or adding additional clarification or examples.

Tone: What tone does this prompt set? Is this a grueling, impeccably researched and well-supported report? A creative, free-flowing discussion that explores brave new ideas? What message does your prompt send to students just through its tone?

STRATEGIES FOR INTRODUCING WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS IN CLASS

- **Read:** Read through the entire prompt together in class
- **Discuss and clarify:** Have students discuss the prompt with a partner + then ask for questions or clarifications
- **Respond:** Have students respond to the prompt immediately after you assign it. You can address these responses individually or discuss trends across the assignment, depending on class size
 - Restate the prompt in your own words.
 - What am I asking you to do in this assignment? *Why* do you think I'm asking you to answer this specific question?
 - Write down *at least* one question you have about the prompt.
 - What do you think you'll write about (you are welcome to change your mind!)?
 - What do you think you'll do first when you get started? What other steps will you need to complete?
 - What are you most excited about? What do you think will be the most challenging part of this assignment?