

## Assignment Design in Four Steps

### Acknowledgements

Resources consulted:

*Designing Effective Assignments* (Centre for Teaching and Learning, Georgian College, August 2011) Retrieved from

[http://www.georgianc.on.ca/staff/ctl/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/assignments\\_3\\_2.pdf](http://www.georgianc.on.ca/staff/ctl/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/assignments_3_2.pdf)

*Assignment Design: Checklist* (Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo, n.d.) Retrieved from

<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/assignment-design/assignment-design-checklist>

*Whys & Hows of Assessment* (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.) Retrieved from

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

### Step 1 Define the assignment idea

The first step in assignment design is to settle on an idea.

Start by reviewing the course goals and module or unit objectives. The assignment should clearly relate to a course goal or a module/unit objective. In fact, the strongest assignment idea will link with both.

You should be able to turn a course goal or module objective into an assignment idea. Try it out by writing the goal or objective like this

I want my students to be able to \_\_\_\_\_.

using active, measurable verbs like **recognize, interpret, solve, compare, critique**, or **write** to describe what you want them to do. Rewriting the goal or objective using an action verb will point you towards a suitable assignment. See the PDF Resource *Action Verbs* on the *Assignment Design* page for more examples of active, measurable verbs.

Once you have an idea for an assignment, ask yourself:

- What will the end result tell you about student learning?
- How will the assignment help students synthesize course materials, promote critical thinking, deepen their understanding of course topics, or practice skills?
- Does the assignment build on earlier assignments or learning activities? Ideally, assignments that required the most synthesis of knowledge and skills should come later in the term, preceded by assignments or activities that build the required knowledge and skills incrementally.

If your idea stands up to these “test” questions, you are ready to move onto the next step.

## **Step 2 Translate your idea into assignment tasks that are engaging and relevant**

Now that you've settled on the assignment idea, you need to work out what the students will actually do for the assignment. Ask yourself:

- What kinds of tasks does this idea suggest? For example, group discussion, description of a process, literature review, research paper.
- What kinds of thinking will be assessed? For example: explaining, interpreting, examining critically.
- Will the students be able to complete the assignment tasks with the knowledge and skills they've gained so far in the course? If not, where and how can you build in the needed knowledge and skill development activities?
- Will students complete the assignment individually, in pairs or in groups?
- Will the assignment tasks encourage academic integrity – that is, the correct use of materials produced by others?
- Will the tasks develop important skills both for your course and beyond (e.g. skills for the workplace, skills for life)?

## **Step 3 Determine what instructional resources students will need to successfully complete the assignment, work out a title and consider the assignment workload and course schedule**

The third step in the process is to think about instructional resources and support your students will need to complete the assignment, settle on a title and consider the assignment workload in relation to the overall course workload.

Start by considering what instructional resources are needed for the assignment. Ask yourself:

- Can students complete the assignment tasks with the instructional resources I'm planning to include in the course? For example, the assigned readings, instructional notes, class discussions, learning activities.
- Would the assignment engage and challenge them if they had to find additional resources to work with? How will they identify and acquire these?
- Would it be useful for students to get some feedback early on as they work on the assignment? For example, on the organizational structure of their assignment or on an early draft? Giving students feedback early on in their assignment work can result in more effective and productive learning and thinking.

Next, reflecting on what you've decided so far about the assignment tasks and required resources, work out a title for the assignment. Students can be misled by assignments that are named inappropriately. For example, if you want students to analyze the strengths and limitations of a process but you name the assignment a "process description", students may focus their energies on the descriptive, not the critical elements of the task. So as you reflect, ask yourself:

- Does the title clearly communicate the intention of the assignment?

Now, consider the assignment workload in relation to the overall course schedule and ask yourself:

- Is the assignment workload reasonable and can it be successfully completed in the allotted time, given the overall course workload and other demands on students' time?
  - How long do you think it will take students to complete all the tasks or parts of the assignment?
  - Does the schedule and due date fit in with the schedules and dates for other assignments and learning activities?
  - If there is an overlap with other assignments and learning activities, will students have difficulty scheduling their time to meet all course due dates?
- Will you have sufficient turn-around time for marking in order to make the assignment feedback meaningful for students?

#### **Step 4 Work out the assignment guidelines or parameters and write the description**

By this point in the assignment planning process, you probably have specific guidelines or parameters in mind for the assignment. Here's a generic list to help you plan. Not all of the items on this list will be relevant for all assignments.

- What are the assignment length limitations and due dates?
- What aspects of the assignment will be evaluated – effort, thinking process and/or progress, research process, drafts, final product?
- What is the weighting of assignment components – how much is each part worth?
- Who will evaluate the assignment? You, peers, community professionals?
- What type of grade is required (numeric, alphabetic, pass/fail, complete/incomplete)?
- How will students submit the assignment? For example, through the Assignment tool? Through a discussion forum posting?

At this stage, you should also think about what your policies will be for late or incomplete assignments, plagiarism, grade appeals, etc.

Now you're ready to draft the assignment description and the instructions. Your students will have a wide range of learning skills and approaches to reading assignment descriptions and instructions, so you will want to make these to be as clear and as comprehensive as possible.

The purpose of the **assignment description** is to explain to your students **why** they are doing the assignment and what purpose it serves. The **instructions** provide the "**how to**".

The assignment description should:

- include the key parts of the assignment (background information, relevance to course goals or unit/module objectives), task (what to do), and stages (the timeline for completing the key stages of the assignment)
- use plain language – avoid jargon

- explain acceptable sources for information and your preference for proper citation of references
- specify the assignment parameters (e.g. length limitations, due date, weighting of components)
- clearly outline how the assignment will be assessed

Review your draft – identify any unclear instructions and jargon, then revise accordingly.

Are you still happy with the title? Does it still communicate the assignment intention accurately? If not, now's the time to revise.