Designing Assignments

Content

This document is meant for faculty and instructors who want to design better assignments. We start by addressing the question 'Why assignments are important?' Next, we talk about the questions that should be answered before the assignment is set. Then we discuss the principles to abide by while designing assignments. Finally, we conclude with the 4 C's of assignment design.

Why are Assignments Important?

Designing assignments is an essential component of assessing student learning. Well-designed assignments help answer the question of what students are learning in class and whether they are meeting the intended learning outcomes. It is important to think about how assignments are designed and assessed so that they can support student learning.

Assignments aid the learning process and facilitate feedback. Learning is a process which requires multiple opportunities to interact with the material. Moreover, different students learn in different ways and at a different pace. Having a variety of assignments provides multiple opportunities to students to interact with the material and to approach the material in different ways. Different types of assignments can be an argument paper, book/article review, business plan, concept map, case simulation, field work, library research, literature review, etc.[1]. Feedback is a critical aspect of learning. Assignments enable students to get feedback from the faculty – you as well as their peers (in case of peer-assessed assignments).

Assignments give you the opportunity to include formative as well as summative assessment in your course. Formative assessment consists of low-stakes assignments which help monitor learning and identify areas where students are struggling. They help you take timely corrective action to further student learning. Summative assessments are typically, high-stakes assignments which assess student learning against a standard. They help you assign a final grade to students[2].

Questions to Answer Before the Assignment

As a faculty, have you ever been disappointed with a batch of assignments which students have turned in? Have you wondered why you had to wade through tens of papers to find one that was up to the mark? Have you pondered on why students fail to analyse or why they do not present concrete arguments to support their stand? Have you felt frustrated at having to read the same old boring stuff repeatedly? We would guess 'Yes!'

You wish your students would turn in assignments which interest you and offer thoughtful and fresh insights about your subject. This could happen if your assignments were written by engaged and motivated writers. How do you make that happen?

The key is designing better assignments. When the students set out to complete an assignment, they do not ask themselves how they can connect with the topic to learn something or how they can communicate their sense of discovery to the teacher. The question on the top of their minds is: What does the teacher want[3]?

Therefore, in the interest of getting better work out of students, you must answer the following questions:

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[1] https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/assessing-student-learning/designing-assignments/
[2] https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/assessing-student-learning/designing-assignments/
[3] https://www.jstor.org/stable/27558248?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

Questions to Answer Before the Assignment
1. What are your expectations from students?
2. What sources should they use?
3. What is the task: summarizing, drawing inferences, comparing, contrasting, analysing or describing?
4. What can the students discover?
5. How can the students be successful? What criteria do you use to judge success?
Source: Simon, L. (1988). The papers we want to read. *College Teaching*, *36*(1), 6-8.

Principles to Abide by When Designing Assignments

Ensure that assignments meet teaching goals

All assignments must be linked to the course goals and learning objectives[4]. To ensure this, ask yourself the following questions[5]:

- What precise course goal or learning objective will the assignment meet?
- What kind of assignment will better meet your teaching goals?
- What will the students gain from the assignment – learning course material, mastering writing conventions in your discipline, or something else?

It might also help if you map assignments to learning outcomes as shown in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Mapping Assignments to Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome	Quiz 1	Quiz 2	Assignment 1	Mid-term Assessment	Assignment 2	Final Assessment
1	x		x		x	
2	x		x		x	x
3		x	x	x		
4		x		x		x
5				x	x	
6			x	x		x

Source: Adapted from https://contensis.uwaterloo.ca/sites/open/resources/CEL-ORR/toc/modules/designing-assignments.aspx

Employ backward design

Faculty often employ a 'forward design' process to design courses, where they decide how to teach, develop assessments around these learning activities and attempt to connect the two with the learning goals of the course. In their book 'Understanding by Design[6]', Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe offer a counterintuitive approach to design courses – Backward Design. Using this method, the
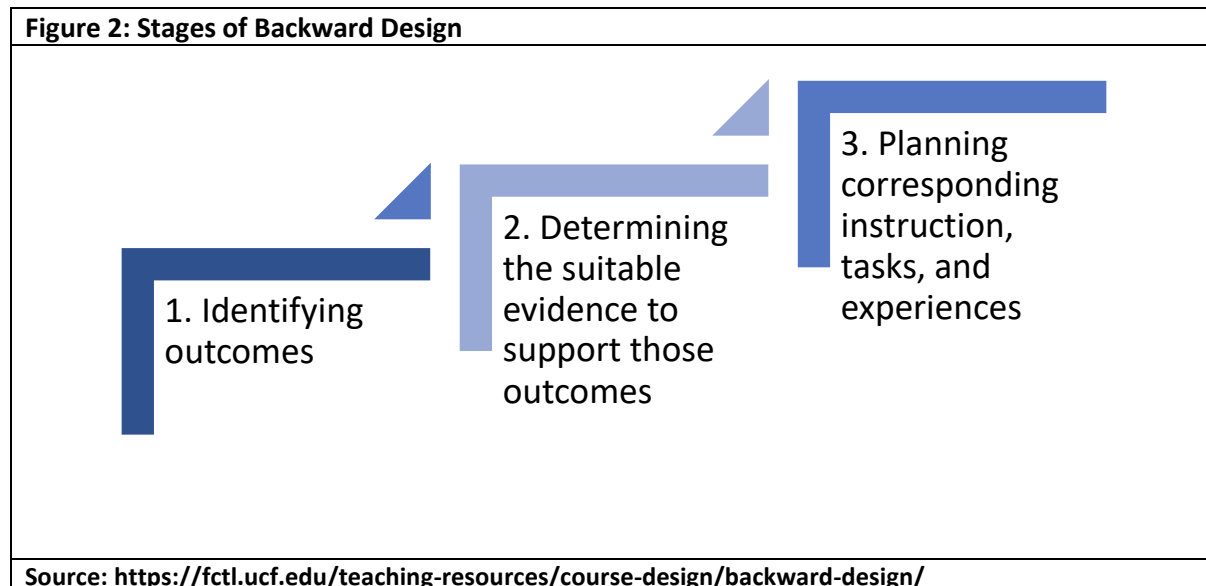
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[4] https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/assignment-design/Pages/strategies.aspx
[5] https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/teaching/guides/designing-assignments/
[6] Wiggins, Grant, and McTighe, Jay. (1998). Backward Design. In *Understanding by Design* (pp. 13-34). ASCD.

instructors should first focus on the intended outcomes of their course, decide how they would assess the students and then think about how to teach the content[7].

Backward design involves three stages as presented in **Figure 2**. Applied to 'designing assignments' it would involve identifying your teaching objectives and the learning outcomes you want students to achieve, followed by determining the specific types of assignments and tasks that will help them do so[8]. This can help you determine which activities must be completed in the early part of the course to support later learning and assignments[9].

Figure 2: Stages of Backward Design

1. Identifying outcomes

2. Determining the suitable evidence to support those outcomes

3. Planning corresponding instruction, tasks, and experiences

Source: https://fctl.ucf.edu/teaching-resources/course-design/backward-design/

Practice clarity in your assignments

Describe the task clearly. If the assignment is open to interpretation, then the students may not achieve the outcome you intended. Likewise, clearly specify the parameters such as assignment length, font size, formatting, citations, etc[10].

When you use words such as 'analyse', 'assess', 'discuss' or 'explain' in the assignment, make sure that students know exactly what is expected of them. Explain why students are doing a particular assignment. It is your responsibility to make the students understand what you are trying to teach them and why it is worthwhile. For instance, explaining the learning goals and intended outcomes to the students may help them grasp the big picture[11].

Specify the purpose and audience of the assignment. Students will do a better job if they know whether they are expected to provide an answer or a reasoning. Similarly, knowing the audience would aid them in pitching their message appropriately[12]. In short, use the RAFT technique in assignment design. Specify the **R**ole (or purpose) that the student would assume while writing the assignment, indicate the **A**udience, clarify the **F**ormat (or genre) of the assignment – white paper, analytical article, descriptive piece, etc and finally clearly define the **T**ask or **T**opic for the assignment[13].

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[7] https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/understanding-by-design/
[8] https://fctl.ucf.edu/teaching-resources/course-design/backward-design/
[9] https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/qr/designing_assignments.html
[10] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
[11] https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/wr-instructor-resources/designing-assignments
[12] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
[13] https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/carl_ltc/quantitative_writing/DiverseWays.html

Give students methods for approaching their work

It is a good idea to include suggestions for how students might approach their assignment. You may include the methods which the students might employ or questions which they may consider to prompt their thought process[14]. Additionally, make resources (readings, web addresses, templates, guidelines for library research, etc.) required for completing the assignment easily available to students. You may also consider providing model answers to students to set expectations[15].

Scaffold assignments

Scaffolding assignments involves providing guidance and feedback to students at regular intervals, prior to assigning the final grade. An example of a scaffolded research paper could be asking the students to turn in their work in various stages of completion at regular intervals, say the topic and structure in the third week of the semester, annotated bibliography in the sixth week, detailed outline in the ninth week, first draft in the twelfth week and final submission in the fifteenth week of the semester[16]. This approach helps students get your inputs at formative stages in their assignment and helps students pace their work through short-term, easily attainable targets.

Sequence assignments

In a course with multiple assignments, it makes sense to sequence assignments in a manner that they build the skills of the students in a logical order. Typically, assignments that require synthesis of skills and knowledge gained over the semester are assigned towards the end. For instance, if the final assignment in a course is a research project which requires students to propose a technical solution to a problem, earlier assignments should focus on building and strengthening component skills such as identifying and discussing problems in the area, applying evaluative criteria and finding credible research sources[17].

Scheduling assignments

Ensure that assignments are reasonably spaced throughout the semester. Take the academic calendar, holidays and campus events into account while scheduling assignment submissions[18].

Share grading rubrics

The grading rubric or evaluation criteria for an assignment must be provided to the students at the time of assigning it. This is to ensure that students know how to approach the assignment. This is akin to telling the students how to succeed in the task you have set out for them.

A 'Sample Grading Rubric for Written Assignments' is presented in **Exhibit 1**. To access illustrative grading rubrics for various kinds of assignments, click here[19].

Other best practices

- Make the assignment challenging for students by setting the difficulty slightly above students' current expertise[20].
- Institute plagiarism checks in the submission software and change your assignment slightly from semester to semester to discourage students from recycling previously submitted assignments.

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[14] https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/wr-instructor-resources/designing-assignments
[15] https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/assignment-design/Pages/strategies.aspx
[16] https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/assessing-student-learning/designing-assignments/
[17] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
[18] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
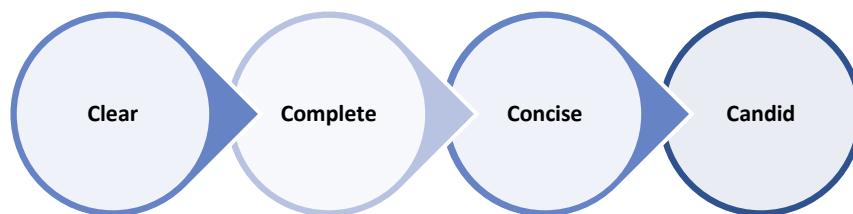[19] https://www.csu.edu/CTRE/pdf/rubricexamples-all.pdf
[20] https://resources.depaul.edu/teaching-commons/teaching-guides/assignment-design/Pages/strategies.aspx

- Ask questions that require an application of knowledge rather than an explanation, to inspire original thoughts[21].

Conclusion

A well-designed assignment must meet the 4 C's criteria presented in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3: 4C's for Designing Assignments
Source: Simon, L. (1988). The papers we want to read. *College Teaching*, *36*(1), 6-8.

An assignment is **clear**, if there is no room for interpretation, using one's judgement or misreading your instructions. An assignment is **complete**, if students have all the information they need to complete the assignment in the way that you want. If you want the students to critique something and not just summarize it, mention it outright. An assignment is **concise** if it doesn't overload the student with unnecessary suggestions. Find a balance between clarity and building a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section in the assignment. Finally, an assignment is **candid** if you are honest in communicating the purpose behind the assignment. Providing useful details on the assignment sheet is not akin to doing students work for them. It is the equivalent of providing tools to the students to turn in something that will be worth your time[22].

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[21] https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/academic-integrity/designing-assignments-encourage-integrity/index.html
[22] https://www.jstor.org/stable/27558248?seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Sample Grading Rubric for Written Assignments

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2" colspan="6">Levels of Assessment</th></tr>
<tr></tr>
<tr><th>Criteria</th><th>Inadequate=D
(Below Standard)</th><th>Adequate=C
(Meets Standard)</th><th>Above Average=B
(Exceeds Standard)</th><th>Exemplary=A
(Far Exceeds Standard)</th></tr>
<tr><td>**Organization**</td><td>Writing lacks logical organization. It shows some coherence but ideas lack unity. Serious errors.</td><td>Writing is coherent and logically organized. Some points remain misplaced and stray from the topic. Transitions evident but not used throughout essay.</td><td>Writing is coherent and logically organized with transitions used between ideas and paragraphs to create coherence. Overall unity of ideas is present.</td><td>Writing shows high degree of attention to logic and reasoning of points. Unity clearly leads the reader to the conclusion and stirs thought regarding the topic.</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Level of Content**</td><td>Shows some thinking and reasoning but most ideas are underdeveloped and unoriginal.</td><td>Content indicates thinking and reasoning applied with original thought on a few ideas.</td><td>Content indicates original thinking and develops ideas with sufficient and firm evidence.</td><td>Content indicates synthesis of ideas, in-depth analysis and evidences original thought and support for the topic.</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Development**</td><td>Main points lack detailed development. Ideas are vague with little evidence of critical thinking.</td><td>Main points are present with limited detail and development. Some critical thinking is present.</td><td>Main points well developed with quality supporting details and quantity. Critical thinking is weaved into points</td><td>Main points well developed with high quality and quantity support. Reveals high degree of critical thinking.</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Grammar & Mechanics**</td><td>Spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors create distraction, making reading difficult; fragments, comma splices, run-ons evident. Errors are frequent.</td><td>Most spelling, punctuation, and grammar correct allowing reader to progress though essay. Some errors remain.</td><td>Essay has few spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors allowing reader to follow ideas clearly. Very few fragments or run-ons.</td><td>Essay is free of distracting spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors; absent of fragments, comma splices, and run-ons.</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Style**</td><td>Mostly in elementary form with little or no variety in sentence structure, diction, rhetorical devices or emphasis.</td><td>Approaches college level usage of some variety in sentence patterns, diction, and rhetorical devices.</td><td>Attains college level style; tone is appropriate and rhetorical devices used to enhance content; sentence variety used effectively.</td><td>Shows outstanding style going beyond usual college level; rhetorical devices and tone used effectively; creative use of sentence structure and coordination</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Format**</td><td>Fails to follow format and assignment requirements; incorrect margins, spacing and indentation; neatness of essay needs attention.</td><td>Meets format and assignment requirements; generally correct margins, spacing, and indentations; essay is neat but may have some assembly errors.</td><td>Meets format and assignment requirements; margins, spacing, and indentations are correct; essay is neat and correctly assembled.</td><td>Meets all formal and assignment requirements and evidences attention to detail; all margins, spacing and indentations are correct; essay is neat and correctly assembled with professional look.</td></tr>
</table>

Source: http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/criteria.pdf

May 2021