Writing Assignments Well

Contents

This document is meant for students who want to do better on their assignments. We start by addressing the question 'Why assignments are important?' Next, we talk about the questions that should be answered before attempting the assignment. Finally, we discuss some tips on writing better assignments.

Why are Assignments Important?

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 you to get feedback from the faculty – you as well as your peers (in case of peer-assessed assignments).

Questions to Answer Before Attempting the Assignment

Before attempting the assignment, you must answer the following questions:

1. What is the task?

Is the assignment clear? Does the assignment entail summarizing, drawing inferences, comparing, contrasting, analysing or describing? Are parameters such as assignment length, font size, formatting, citations, etc[2] clearly specified? Is the wording ambiguous? If the assignment is open to interpretation, then you may draw a different conclusion than what your instructor intended.

2. How should you approach the assignment? What sources should you use?

Does the assignments prompt include suggestions on how you might approach the assignment – in terms of methods you might employ or questions which may prompt your thought process[3]? Are resources (readings, web addresses, templates, guidelines for library research, etc.) required for completing the assignment easily available to you?

3. Are you clear about the purpose and audience of the assignment?

You will do a better job if you know whether you are expected to provide information with an answer or a reasoning. Similarly, knowing the audience would aid you in pitching your message appropriately[4]. In short, use the RAFT technique while doing the assignment. Think about the **R**ole (or purpose) that you would assume while writing the assignment, the **A**udience you would address, the **F**ormat (or genre) of the assignment – white paper, analytical article, descriptive piece, etc and finally clearly interpret the **T**ask or **T**opic for the assignment[5].

4. What criteria will the instructor use to judge success?

Ask the instructor to share the grading rubric or evaluation criteria. Take a look at the sample grading rubric presented in **Exhibit 1**. It will tell you which points to focus on and what to include to successfully complete the assignment.

5. Does the assignment meet the 4C's of well-designed assignments?

Check if your assignment meets the 4 C's criteria presented in **Figure 1**.

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[1] https://ucat.osu.edu/bookshelf/teaching-topics/assessing-student-learning/designing-assignments/
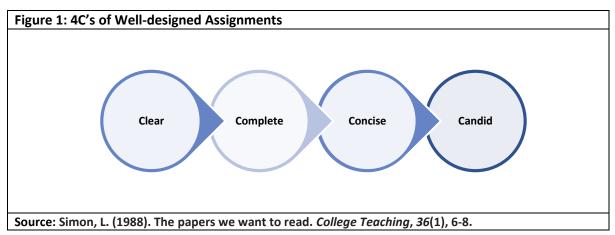[2] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
[3] https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/writing/wr-instructor-resources/designing-assignments
[4] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html
[5] https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/carl_ltc/quantitative_writing/DiverseWays.html

Figure 1: 4C's of Well-designed Assignments

| Clear | Complete | Concise | Candid |

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 instructions. An assignment is **complete**, if you have all the information you need to complete the assignment. An assignment is **concise** if it doesn't overload you with unnecessary suggestions. Finally, an assignment is **candid** if it honestly in communicates the purpose behind the task. If the assignment is lacking on any of these criteria, do approach your instructor for clarifications.

Using Feedback to Improve your Assignments

It is likely that your instructor will give you feedback once they grade the assignment. Undoubtedly, that feedback is valuable. It can help you understand your strengths and weaknesses and what you should do to improve your grade or at least your next assignment. However, it will be better if you take a more proactive approach and seek feedback actively; while you are working on the assignment. This will help to improve your work. When you ask for feedback, include specific questions about the flow, organization, analysis, grammar, writing, etc. to receive actionable feedback[6].

Once you receive the feedback, you must put in effort to ensure that you understand it. This is not as easy as it sounds. Suppose you receive the feedback that your assignment demonstrated, 'weak analysis' or 'lack of criticality' or 'insufficient engagement with literature', ask yourself if you understand what the instructor means exactly. Do not hesitate to ask if you are unsure. Log the feedback meticulously so that it is easily accessible and use the feedback points as a checklist in preparing future assignments[7].

Tips on Writing Better Assignments[8]

Start by making an outline

Your first step should be to build a blueprint or an outline of the assignment. Plan the number of sections, their organization, possible sources before writing the assignment. Building a structure first and drafting tentative arguments will help you be more productive.

Use appropriate words

Academic assignments demand more formal and technical words than casual writing. You will be expected to use words which are more precise in their meaning. For example, using words like examine, describe, analyse, present, investigate, explore, define instead of 'we see how' or 'we talk about'. Consider using SKell or Writefull to improve your writing.

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[6] https://writingcenter.unc.edu/esl/resources/requesting-feedback-on-writing/
[7] https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/feedback-on-your-assignments-what-it-is-and-how-to-use-it/
[8] https://theconversation.com/5-tips-on-writing-better-university-assignments-130541

Use all available sources

If you read the assignment prompt properly, you will notice that your instructor has provided several resources that you can refer to while working on the assignment. Use all available sources of information such as lecture notes, slide deck, reading list, sample assignments and discussion boards.

Be wary of plagiarism

Do not lift text from online sources. Paraphrase to the extent possible. Make sure to attribute any words or ideas which you pick up from somebody else's work. Not doing so falls under the ambit of plagiarism and counts as cheating. Pay attention to which referencing style (such as Harvard, Chicago, APA, MLA, etc.) your instructor has asked you to use in the assignment prompt. You can use reference management software such as Mendeley, Zotero or Endnote for convenience.

Proofread before submitting

If you submit your assignment without proofreading, you are bound to leave a few silly mistakes. The spell checker on your word processor or grammar checkers like Grammarly may not catch every mistake or even give inaccurate suggestions. Try to catch mistakes in overall organization, flow, sentence structure, referencing at this stage[9]. There is no alternative to proofreading and editing your assignment before submitting it.

As an alternative strategy, you can ask a friend to help you diagnose errors in your assignment or you can return to the assignment after a day. Fresh eyes – your friend's or your own – make a difference[10].

Make your assignment stand out

Step into the shoes of your instructor and think about their thought process as they go through your and your classmates' assignments. If you turn in work that just meets the minimum expectations, you are going to make an average grade. So, consider how you can make your assignment stand out. How can you include insights that will make the time your instructor spends in reading the assignment, worthwhile? Talk to your instructor, teaching assistant, librarian, senior, a peer – anyone who can give you that edge.

Do not balk at assignments that require effort

Working hard on your assignments is a great tactic to make the learning stickier and work towards your course's final assessments. The more effort you put in on your assignment, the longer you will be able to recall the material. Conversely, the easier the assignment is, the quicker you are likely to forget any learnings from it. Afterall, learning is an effortful process[11], where the stickiness of learning is directly proportional to how much effort you put in.

Conclusion

Assignments are an essential component of assessing your learning. They help answer the question of what you are learning in class and whether you are meeting the intended learning outcomes.

Just keep at it, and you will do well on your assignments.

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[9] https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/planresearchpaper/
[10] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/writing/helpstudentwriters.html
[11] https://kassiemcgarry.wordpress.com/2017/11/24/effortful-learning-synthesis%E2%80%8B/

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Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Sample Grading Rubric for Written Assignments

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

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