Principles of Assignment Design

- **Reflect on the purpose of writing assignments.** Knowing why we are asking students to read and write in particular ways will help us to situate our assignments among disciplinary practices, habits of mind, and intellectual values. There are a number of possible purposes for students to write in a class:
  - Writing in order to learn/digest the material.
  - Writing to demonstrate that they have learned or digested the material.
  - Writing academic papers appropriate to the discipline.
  - Writing workplace documents appropriate to the field.

- **Teach** the things we want students to do in their writing and explicitly ask them to do those things in your assignments.

- **Be consistent** in what you ask for and how you evaluate it: although we know we should not ask for one thing and evaluate for another, in practice it is hard to be consistent. (For example, don’t ask students to “explore” and then mark them down for not having an explicit thesis.)

- **Keep in mind that the expectations of your discipline likely influence your expectations.** Be explicit about those expectations and explain their derivation. Help students recognize that different disciplines have different expectations and that yours are not purely idiosyncratic.

Tips for Designing Successful Assignments

- Use exemplary papers as a basis for designing your assignment: work backwards from exemplary student essays or published pieces to articulate your expectations.
- Use outcomes: each department and core course has a set of outcomes. Explain to students how the assignment relates to these outcomes.
- Use template: an assignment template will make it easier for you to design assignments and ensure consistency.
- Be explicit about your expectations.
- When possible, provide students with examples of successfully completed assignments.
- Scaffold student work by providing organizing structures.
- Assign several short papers rather than one long one. Students faced with multiple long research papers at the end of the semester are less likely to write a successful paper for several reasons: 1. they often do not know how to break the project down into manageable tasks; 2. to write well requires regular practice, and students who write long papers at the end of the semester are out of practice.
- Break longer writing assignments down into smaller assignments that build on one another.
Allow students to submit drafts for feedback.
Identify trends in the ways that students fail to complete assignments successfully and revise your subsequent assignments accordingly.

**Strategies for Supporting Your Learning Goals**

- When you distribute an assignment, give students class time to pose questions about it.
- Distribute the assignment at the beginning of class to demonstrate how your day’s session prepares them for it.
- Hand out a successful version of the paper and spend ten minutes telling the class what makes it strong. Use the language of your values as much as possible: “This paper’s analysis of the data is strong. I see this on pages 3 and 8, which show…”
- Have students write a cover letter (either before class or just before turning the essays in) in which they discuss how they have fulfilled the assignment.
- When you have completed evaluating a batch of papers, take class time to name what differentiated strong ones from struggling ones in light of the assignment’s requirements.
Assignment Template:

**Relevant outcomes:** use course, department, or core outcomes to identify the goals of the assignment for the student.

**Audience:** Specify an audience based on your expectations.

*Examples:*
- “Your audience consists of other researchers interested in the same topic.”
- “Explain in a cover letter who your audience is and how you adapted your writing to that audience.”
- “Write for your peers and others who are preparing for xx career.”
- “Write for peers who have not read these sources.”

**Genre:** Identify the piece’s genre to help students develop genre awareness. This genre awareness will help them as they move from course to course and into the work world.

*Examples:*
- Argumentative response
- Research Proposal
- Exploratory essay
- Research essay
- Memoir/Personal Narrative
- Annotated bibliography
- Letter
- Glossary

**Purpose:** Tell students what their purpose should be in writing the assignment.

*Examples:*
- To construct an argument.
- To analyze and respond to a text.
- To inform.
- To describe.
- To read a text through a theoretical lens
- To summarize and present research on a topic.

**Organization:** For longer assignments provide students with possible structures for organizing their papers.

*Examples:*
- Comparison (give specific examples of this: subject-by-subject; point-by-point)
- Provide a background of the problem before describing solutions/recommendations.
- First summarize the literature and then articulate your response.

**Provide formatting information:** Include page length or word count, font size, formatting style.

**Tips:** This is the place for expectations you have not articulated elsewhere in the assignment. Once you’ve assigned a writing assignment more than once, you develop a sense of the pitfalls. Use these pitfalls to provide your students with tips. Also, if you have your own writing pet peeves, include them here too.

*This handout was created in collaboration with Beverly Army Williams and Chalet Seidel.*