

# Creating an Effective Assignment

## Some Valuable Ideas You'll Find in This Chapter

- Every assignment should help students achieve important learning goals.
- Give students a variety of assignments, not just traditional essays and research papers.
- Ask yourself if students will learn significantly more from a thirty-page assignment than a five-page assignment—enough to justify the time that they and you will spend on it.
- Break apart large assignments into pieces that are due at various times.
- Address plagiarism consistently and collaboratively across campus through education as well as consequences.

When we ask students to write an essay, complete a research project, create a work of art, use laboratory materials, or give a speech, providing clear instructions and guidance on what students are to do and why will help them learn what we value. This is where prompts—the subject of this chapter—come in.

## What Is a Prompt?

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A prompt is simply an assignment: the statement or question (usually written) that tells students what they are to do in a performance

assessment (Chapter Two), essay test question, and virtually everything else we ask students to do except to complete objective tests and rating forms.

There are two basic kinds of prompts. *Restricted response* prompts ask everyone to provide pretty much the same response, just in his or her own words. An example is giving all students the same chart and asking them to write a paragraph summarizing its major points. Many mathematics problems and science laboratory assignments are restricted response prompts.

*Extended response* prompts give students latitude in deciding how to complete the assignment. Their completed assignments may vary considerably in organization, style, and content. Suppose that students are asked to speculate, with appropriate justification, on how our daily lives might be different today if the United States had never engaged in space exploration. The visions and supporting evidence in equally outstanding papers might vary a great deal.

## Why Are Good Prompts Important? \_\_\_\_\_

Carefully crafted prompts are critical parts of the teaching-learning process because, regardless of what we state in syllabi or say in class, the assignments we give students are the most powerful way we communicate our expectations to them. A good prompt inspires students to give the assignment their best effort and thereby achieve the assignment's learning goals. With a poorly written prompt, students may complete an assignment without learning what we want them to learn.

Suppose that history faculty want students to be able to analyze the impact of a noteworthy individual on the outcome of World War II. They ask students simply to write a term paper on "a person involved with World War II," with no further guidance or direction. Some students might complete the assignment by summarizing the life history of an individual, doing nothing to develop—or demonstrate—their analysis skills. When faculty review the papers for assessment purposes, they may find little evidence of analysis skill, not because students are poor at analysis but because this assignment never explicitly asked the students to analyze.

## Identifying Specific, Important Learning Goals for the Assignment \_\_\_\_\_

Begin creating a good prompt by deciding what you want students to learn from the assignment. The assignment should focus students on the skills and conceptual understandings that you

consider most important. For a writing assignment, identify the specific kinds of writing skills that you most want students to strengthen. The best way to identify the learning goals you want students to achieve by completing the assignment is to develop a rubric (Chapter Nine).

A good assignment sets challenging but realistic expectations. Often when students know exactly what they need to do to achieve a high score, they will rise to meet that standard, even if it means accomplishing things to which they never thought they could aspire. Ask students to demonstrate not just simple understanding but also thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creativity. Focusing on these kinds of skills makes the assignment more challenging, worthwhile, and interesting and promotes deeper learning. If you give students a copy of the rubric you will use to evaluate their completed assignments, as suggested in Chapter Nine, make sure that it states clearly what you consider outstanding work.

## Creating a Meaningful Task or Problem Corresponding to Those Goals

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Once you have clarified the key learning goals of an assignment, identify a task that corresponds to those goals and will help your students achieve them. (A writing assignment would obviously be a poor way to learn presentation skills!) Chapter Three discussed the importance of giving students a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning. Table 10.1 lists examples of assignments beyond the usual term paper or essay. Most of these assignments are performance assessments (Chapter Two) that ask students to demonstrate skills—often in realistic settings—rather than simply describe or explain those skills.

Textbooks and other curricular materials may give you some ideas for assignments, but a better approach is to think of a real-life task. Such assignments engage students and help them see that they are learning something worthwhile. Try “you are there” scenarios: “You are an expert chemist [statistician, teacher, anthropologist, or whatever] asked to help with the following situation . . .” Such role playing need not be realistic: “You are one of President Andrew Jackson’s closest advisors . . .”; “You are a member of the first space team traveling to Mars . . .”

Exhibits 10.1 and 10.2 are examples of prompts that abide by most of the suggestions that follow. More examples are in *Effective Grading* (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998) and *Learning-Centered Assessment on College Campuses* (Huba & Freed, 2000).

**Table 10.1.** Examples of Assignments Beyond Essays, Term Papers, and Research Reports

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Abstract or executive summary
Advertisement or commercial
Annotated bibliography
Autobiography or realistic fictional diary from a historical period
Briefing paper
Brochure or pamphlet
Campaign speech
Case study or analysis
Client report
Collaborative group activity
Database
Debate or discussion (plan, participation, or leadership)
Debriefing interview preparation
Dramatization of an event or scenario, in writing or a presentation
Editing and revising a poorly written paper
Evaluation of opposing points of view or the pros and cons of alternative solutions to a problem
Experiment or other laboratory experience
Field notes
Game invention
Graph, chart, diagram, flowchart, or other visual aid
Graphic organizer, taxonomy, or classification scheme
Handbook or instructional manual
Journal or log (Chapter Twelve)
Letter to an editor or business
Model, simulation, or illustration
Narrative
Newspaper story or news report on a concept or from a historical period
Oral history recording of an event
Plan to research and solve a problem
Plan to conduct a project or provide a service
Portfolio (Chapter Thirteen)
Poster, display, or exhibit
Presentation, demonstration, or slide show
Process description
Proposal for and justification of a solution to a problem
Reflection on what and how one has learned (Chapter Twelve)
Review and critique of one's own work, that of a peer, a performance, an exhibit, a work of art, a writer's arguments, or how something could have been done better
Selected portions of an essay or term paper (for example, only the problem statement and the review of literature)
Survey, including an analysis of the results
Teaching a concept to a peer or child
Video or audio recording
Web site

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### Exhibit 10.1. A Prompt for a First-Year Composition Essay Assignment

In *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, Celie and her husband Albert, known simply as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, have a heated exchange in which Celie reveals to him that she is leaving him to move to Memphis to start her own business. Afterward, he retorts with the following remarks: "Look at you, you black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman . . . You nothing at all."

Some men who have engaged in physical and mental abuse of women have been asked to attend a program on abuse. As part of the program, they will be asked to read an essay in which you persuade them not to engage in the kind of behavior that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ displays.

Write this essay. Keep in mind that most of the men will be unfriendly or hostile to your ideas, so you must really convince them with your arguments.

Your essay will be graded in terms of content, organization, style/expression, and grammar/mechanics.

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*Source:* Adapted with permission from a prompt by Lena Ampadu, associate professor of English, Towson University.

## Choose an Assignment That's a Worthwhile Use of Learning Time

Consider carefully whether the time students put into your assignment will yield an appropriate payoff in terms of their learning. Will they learn twice as much from an assignment that takes twenty hours of out-of-class time as from one that takes ten hours? Will students learn significantly more from a thirty-page paper than from a five-page paper (which may take you one-sixth the time to evaluate)? Sometimes your learning goals may not demand a traditional term paper or research project. Students may achieve learning goals just as effectively by completing a research proposal or a relatively short annotated bibliography.

## Aim Students at the Desired Outcome

Give your students clear, written directions and scaffolding on which they can successfully create their best work. Begin the prompt with an introductory sentence that's an overview of what you want them to do, and then answer the questions in Table 10.2.

While good prompts are often generous in the guidance they give to students, some faculty like to give purposefully vague assignments because they want students to learn how to figure out the assignment on their own. This practice can be fine, but only if:

- One of the learning goals of the assignment is to learn how to choose, define, or clarify a problem or issue; *and*

### Exhibit 10.2. A Prompt for an Educational Research Problem Statement

To help you be an intelligent consumer of educational research, your major task in this course will be to write a proposal to conduct an educational research project. You won't actually conduct the research, but by writing a proposal you will demonstrate that you understand what good-quality research is. You will also be able to learn more about a topic in education that interests you.

The first part of the research proposal is a statement of the problem to be investigated and will constitute 15 percent of your final grade. If you submit the statement before the due date, I will critique your work and give you a tentative grade. If you're satisfied with that grade, you may stop work, and if you'd like to improve your grade, you may submit a revision by the due date.

The statement of the problem should:

- Be no longer than two pages
- Include a statement of the research problem to be investigated, the reasons you chose this topic, and what you hypothesize would be the results of your research
- Include definitions of any key terms relevant to your topic, woven into the discussion rather than listed separately
- Be accompanied by a completed reflection page that shows evidence of serious thought.

An *outstanding (A)* paper has the following characteristics:

- It meets all the *content requirements* of the assignment, as described above.
- It is *error free*: For example, it has no erroneous conclusions or misunderstandings of research concepts.
- It uses *appropriate language*. Sentence and paragraph structure and vocabulary are all simple ("because" instead of "due to the fact that"). Unemotional, professional terms and phrasings are used (*not* "I was amazed to find . . ."). There are no contractions.
- It is *well written*. It is clear, understandable, and well organized, with an appropriate flow and headings. There are sound rationales for conclusions and decisions, evidence of serious thought, and no inconsistencies in what is said.

A *good (B)* paper is well done, but with some significant flaws not in an A paper (such as some errors or unclear statements).

An *adequate (C)* paper meets the content requirements, and its major points can be understood, but it has several significant flaws not in an A paper (for example, the content is not uniformly clear or consistent, or the paper has minimal discussion.).

An *inadequate (F)* paper seriously fails to meet most of the characteristics of an A paper. Most critically, it does not meet the content requirements and/or is so poorly written that its major points cannot be understood.

- Students have opportunities to learn and practice these skills before tackling the assignment; *and*
- This learning goal is reflected in the rubric (Chapter Nine) used to evaluate the assignment.

Good prompts for major assignments such as portfolios or term projects can run a page or more. Brevity is important,

**Table 10.2.** Questions to Address in a Prompt for an Assignment

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*Why are you giving students this assignment?*  
 What is its purpose?  
 What do you expect students to learn by completing it? For example, are students simply to summarize information or use the information to persuade? Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson (1998) point out that the title of an assignment is a powerful way to convey to students what you want them to do. They suggest using terms like *argumentative essay*, *original research project*, or *sociological analysis*, which make the assignment clearer than the usual term *paper*.

*What should the completed assignment look like?*  
 Who is the (perhaps hypothetical) audience for the assignment: academicians, people working in a particular setting, or the general public?  
 What skills and knowledge do you want students to demonstrate?  
 Explain terms that may be fuzzy to your students even if they are clear to you, such as *compare*, *evaluate*, and *discuss*.

What should be included in the completed assignment?  
 How should students format the completed assignment?

*How are students to complete the assignment? How do you expect them to devote their time and energy?*  
 How much time do you expect them to spend on this assignment? If this is a class assignment, how much will it count toward their final course grade?  
 If the assignment is to write something, what is an optimal length for the paper?  
 What readings, reference materials, and technologies are they expected to use?  
 Can they collaborate with others? If so, to what extent?  
 What assistance can you provide while they are working on the assignment? (Are you willing to critique drafts, for example?)

*How will you score or grade the assignment?* The best way to communicate this is to give students a copy of the rubric that you will use to evaluate completed assignments.

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however, when you are asking for very short responses such as minute papers (Chapter Twelve) or when you are giving timed in-class assignments such as an essay exam. In these situations, every minute counts, and time spent reading your prompt is time that can't be spent thinking or responding.

### Break Apart Large Assignments

Rather than distribute a major assignment on the first day of class and collect the papers on the last day, break the assignment into pieces that are handed in or checked at various points during the course. You might ask students to submit an outline of a research paper first and then an annotated bibliography. This kind of approach helps students manage their time and, more important, gets those heading in a wrong direction back on track before it's too late for them to salvage their project. Breaking an assignment into pieces can also discourage plagiarism, as discussed below, and it makes your job of evaluating the completed assignments more manageable.

Depending on your students' needs, your goals, and your time constraints, at these checkpoints you might:

- Simply check off that this portion of the project is complete or in progress
- Review and comment on this portion of the project
- Have student peers evaluate this portion of the project using a rubric that you provide
- Give this portion of the project a tentative grade (pending subsequent revisions) or a final grade

### Encourage Students to Reflect on Their Work

Reflection can promote deep, lasting learning, so consider asking students to submit written reflections with at least some of their assignments. Chapter Twelve discusses this further.

### Countering Plagiarism \_\_\_\_\_

The work of others is so readily available today that student plagiarism is a growing concern. Although there is no way to eliminate plagiarism, the strategies in Table 10.3 (Carroll, 2004) may help.

### Time to Think, Discuss, and Practice \_\_\_\_\_

1. Choose one of the following (poorly written!) prompts:
  - Compare the writing styles of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.
  - Compare the Republican and Democratic parties.
  - Describe the operation of a microscope.
  - Research the demographics of various ethnic groups in the United States.
  - Compare the strengths, weaknesses, and uses of quantitative and qualitative assessment.
2. Choose one person in your group to play the role of the faculty member who wrote the prompt. That person will answer your group's questions about the course or program for which the prompt was written and the learning goals that the prompt is intended to assess.



**Table 10.3.** Strategies to Counter Plagiarism

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*Use detection judiciously.*

After papers are turned in, ask students to summarize them.

Use online tools such as Google to search for similar passages.

Interview students or ask them to write reflectively about the process they used to write the paper.

Review papers for out-of-character work; abrupt changes in language, referencing systems, or vocabulary; fully finished works with no evidence of research and writing processes; and anachronisms or only dated references

*Explicitly teach and model academic rules, values, and conventions.*

Provide plenty of instruction and assignments that help students understand exactly what plagiarism is. Focus on what students should do rather than what they should not do. Test their understanding through realistic test questions and assignments on plagiarism.

Model academic integrity in your own examples, lectures, and discussions by citing the sources to which you refer.

Provide opportunities to practice and receive feedback on academic integrity.

*Provide opportunities for students to learn, practice, and get feedback on research and writing skills.*

Teach research and writing skills as they apply to your discipline.

*Use fair assessment practices* (Chapter Three).

*Give clearly articulated assignments that are plainly linked to key learning outcomes* (Chapter Eight).

Vary the kinds of assignments you give.

Give creative assignments that don't lend themselves to plagiarism. Assign oral or visual presentations rather than written papers; break large assignments into small pieces; or give assignments that ask students to relate concepts learned to personal or local experiences.

*Work with your colleagues to make a concerted and consistent effort to address plagiarism.*

Develop and implement appropriate and consistent policies for all students and programs.

Be consistent in how plagiarism policies are explained, applied, and enforced.

Provide timely, transparent, and defensible penalties.

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3. Identify what makes the prompt ineffective.
4. With input from the role-playing group member, rewrite the prompt so it meets the criteria of good prompts.

## Recommended Readings

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The following readings are recommended along with the references cited in this chapter.

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