

Elements of an Effective Writing Assignment

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• **The assignment.** Surprisingly, many teachers forget to include the crucial ingredient: the assignment itself. At least one sentence on your assignment sheet should explicitly state what you want students to do. The assignment is usually signaled by a verb, such as “analyze,” “assess,” “explain,” or “discuss.” For example, in a history course, after reading a model biography, students were directed as follows:

Your assignment is to write your own biographical essay on Mao, using Mao’s reminiscences (as told to a Western journalist), speeches, encyclopedia articles, a medical account from Mao’s physician, and two contradictory obituaries.

A good strategy for coming up with an effective assignment is to imagine the kind of essay you want students to write, then to work backwards to the specific instruction that’s likely to produce it. Having drafted the assignment, you should read it from a student’s point of view for clarity and comprehensibility. *Note that the best assignments nudge students toward making an argument.*

• **The purpose of the assignment.** Explaining to students why they’re doing a particular assignment can help them grasp the big picture—what you’re trying to teach them and why learning it is worthwhile. For example,

This assignment has three goals: for you to (1) see how the concepts we’ve learned thus far can be used in a different field from economics, (2) learn how to write about a model, and (3) learn to critique a model or how to defend one.

• **Approaches to the assignment.** Some instructors give students assignment sheets that are filled with big blocks of questions and lengthy ruminations on the topic. Students often can’t tell which part is the assignment itself and which is advice for approaching it. To avoid confusing students, it’s best to separate the assignment from methods for approaching it, questions to consider, and pitfalls to avoid. For example,

The most successful papers will have a tight focus. Don’t attempt to include all of the suggested topics or comparison passages in your essay. Make an argument based on a close reading of a few carefully selected passages and be sure to make both your argument and the texts that will support that argument clear in the opening paragraph of your paper.

• **Logistics.** When and where is the paper due? How long will it probably be? What are the formatting specifications (margin width, font size, etc.)? What citation style should be used? By answering these questions on the assignment sheet, you can avoid a host of problems later. For example,

Due date: Monday, February 28, at the beginning of class (don’t be late!)
Length: 4-6pp. (1500 words)
Format: Times 12, one-inch margins, no cover page
Citations: MLA in-text citation style; include a properly formatted Works Cited
Sources: Limit yourself to the source book for this assignment; do not do outside research.

It’s also important to tell students your policies regarding extensions, late papers, and rewrites. Many instructors communicate their policies in the syllabus, where they may also list criteria for grading papers and give information about how final grades are calculated.