Creating Effective Assignment Sheets
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The time put into developing a good assignment sheet that effectively gives students directions for doing the writing assignment pays off handsomely, not just for students as they work through it, but in the resulting papers that you will spend time reading and evaluating. As a writing center director, I see many assignment sheets, some well thought out and clearly written. But with those that are not, the writing consultants and I share the frustration that students experience as they try to figure out what the instructor “really” wants.

A vague instruction like write a paper on “X” (Sigmund Freud or the Civil War or a particular play or theory) is perhaps the worst for students to decipher. But an assignment like “Several causes contributed to the downfall of Rome (or the demise of a business); choose one and explain” also creates confusion. Should this be a factual kind of explanation or is the writer expected to argue in favor of one cause over others?

Likewise, an assignment sheet that attempts to cover all bases—five pages of instruction, suggestions, questions that might be considered, and admonitions for a three-page paper—leaves a student confused and overwhelmed.

With any writing assignment, you will get what you ask for. What follows are some suggestions for creating effective assignment sheets that clearly delineate what you expect your students to produce in a paper. Offering them explicit guidelines not only makes their writing task more focused and manageable, but it means that you get better written papers that more clearly meet your expectations and are easier to evaluate.

Why Assignment Sheets?

The well-designed assignment sheet provides students with a clear, permanent record of the assignment’s requirements that they can return to again and again. They can use it as a prompt to stay on task, and to ensure that they do the assignment correctly and fulfill all the requirements.

In addition, creating an assignment sheet allows you to think through exactly what you are asking students to do and why. You will find yourself questioning and clarifying your thoughts and requests as you articulate them for your students. The result? An assignment sheet that clearly describes your expectations, anticipates and answers students’ questions, and produces papers that more closely reflect what you seek.

Note that simply delivering instructions orally, or through a few sentences in the syllabus or on the board, invites vagueness and risks omission of important details, either by you or by students as they take notes.
Creating the Assignment Sheet

Writing an assignment sheet is a process. Begin by asking yourself what you want students to do in this assignment—demonstrate mastery of concepts or texts? Demonstrate critical thinking? Develop an original idea? Learn and demonstrate the procedures, practices, and tools of your field of study? Keep in mind that the best assignments ask students to make an argument and persuade. Whether seeking inquiry, exploration, analysis, discussion, or debate from your students, you might imagine the kind of essay you want them to write, then work backwards to the specific instructions that are likely to produce it.

Consider your word choice carefully, for the words you choose will determine the kind of papers you get. State explicitly what you want students to do and use directive verbs precisely:

- **Analyze** – separate into constituent parts and examine critically
- **Synthesize** – combine or bring together parts (the opposite of “analyze”)
- **Explain** – render understandable by making clear or plain; make known in detail
- **Discuss** – examine or consider by argument, comments, etc.; explore solutions
- **Assess** – evaluate; estimate or explore the value of “X”
- **Compare and contrast** – look at/evaluate similarities and differences
- **Survey** – make a general or comprehensive examination of an area of study or a situation
- **Critique** – review or analyze critically

Once you’ve finished describing the actual assignment, create new, separate sections for advice and for details about requirements like format and documentation. Offering suggestions for how to approach the assignment, questions or areas to consider, and pitfalls to avoid can be most helpful; however, if not presented by themselves and explained clearly, students may think, for example, that they must address all suggested areas or possible questions. Likewise, directions such as the following can be confusing:

“Write a five-page, double-spaced paper using APA format, on ‘X.’ Think about possibly including areas ‘A,’ ‘B,’ ‘C,’ and ‘D,’ but make sure to avoid ‘Y’ and comment on ‘Z.’ Your writing should be clear, persuasive, and error free.”

Before they can even begin the assignment, students must deal with the additional task of sorting and prioritizing your requests.

To help students make rhetorical decisions (like what tone or level of sophistication to take, or what terms or concepts need definition or explanation), consider giving students a hypothetical audience. Depending on the audience, students can factor in issues like the probable educational, social, or economic background of readers. They can also consider readers’ interests, expectations, and biases as they plan and write. If students write only for the instructor, some may write informally or assume that explanations or clarification are unnecessary.
Identifying the student’s role as writer can be helpful, too. An effective role, like writing as a potential professional, is one that asks the writer to use the assumptions, perspectives, and conceptual tools of the discipline.

If you structure the assignment incrementally, sequence tasks logically, and give due dates:

- Topic memo, due …
- Working bibliography, due…
- First draft, due…
- Peer review draft, due…
- Final draft, due…

Not insignificantly, note that structuring assignments in this way not only makes students work on an assignment over time (avoiding writing a paper the night before), but also enables you to monitor their progress, allows you to offer direction or suggestions at appropriate points, and helps to avoid plagiarism.

The assignment sheet should also include details about your formatting requirements (line spacing, margins, font, page numbers, etc.), kinds and numbers of resources allowed (e.g., professional journals vs. popular magazines), and documentation requirements. You might also offer details about appropriate helpful resources, like the Writing Center, special libraries or archives, other campus or professional resources, etc.

Because effective writing is important in all disciplines, consider including an indication that you expect papers to be well-written, grammatically sound, and properly documented. If your class includes several writing assignments, this statement could well appear in your guidelines for the course.

Once you’ve drafted the assignment sheet, put yourself in your students’ shoes. Read it from their perspective. Can you follow it easily? Is all necessary information included and in a logical order? Is it clear and comprehensible? Is it helpful without being overwhelming? Given only the assignment sheet, what questions might you/your students have? Think about all these aspects, then revise.

Finally, remember that your assignment sheet itself serves as a model of good writing, and of the kind of writing that you expect students to produce in the assignment. You will lose credibility and invite sloppiness if you want “good grammar” and ask for “good grammer.”

**Presenting the Assignment**

Most importantly, making time in class to go over the assignment sheet gives students the opportunity to ask questions, but it also gives you the opportunity to comment on aspects of the assignment and explain your reasoning behind them. Seeing an assignment in a context makes it easier for students to approach it; as you introduce an
assignment, you might point out how it lays the groundwork for other assignments or will otherwise be useful to them in the future.

Students often find it helpful to see models, like effective papers from previous semesters. (Be sure to get students’ permission to use their work in this way.) You can make them available by posting them on the ELMs site for your course or by distributing copies in class. While you might offer professional models, like articles from professional journals, recognize that some students find them intimidating, so choose and present them carefully. Some instructors like to present several models so students can see that there is more than one way to construct a paper on a particular topic. In some cases, with book reviews for example, you might bring in examples and use them to discuss possible approaches, the amount of summary included, and evaluative language. Likewise, examples of reviews of literature allow you to explain what they are and how they might be organized (e.g., chronologically, by types).

If you require particular formal features, like title page, headings, citations, etc., distributing or posting examples can be helpful to your students.

One last note: As you seek ideas for creating writing assignments in your discipline and ways to present them effectively, an excellent resource is John Bean and Maryellen Weimer’s Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom, 2nd ed. (Somerset, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2011).