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Assignments

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1. Benefits

High standards and good support are prerequisites of successful student learning.[1] Closely considered and precisely formulated assignments take on a key, supporting role in this endeavour. Clearly formulated objectives, expectations, procedures, and evaluation criteria render visible discipline-specific thought and working processes. As detailed assignments make explicit the steps necessary to complete tasks, they help students to develop independent self-study practices that will benefit them in the long run.[2] For teachers, good assignments are valuable because they help students achieve better results, which in turn leads to more positive teaching experiences.

2. Quality Criteria

2.1. Clearly state learning outcomes and procedures

The assignment contains specific information on the **expected results** (including information on the format, length, etc.), on what the students are supposed **to do**, (ideally using appropriate dynamic verbs) and on the **materials** students are expected to work with.

Explicitly stating expectations and individual steps can be difficult. Teachers have typically internalised their discipline-specific standards and working methods, which makes it difficult to realize and explicate them. However, this information is crucial for students because it guides them toward achieving learning outcomes, and thus toward accessing disciplinary working methods and ways of thinking.[3] See 3. Tips on formulating assignments.

2.2. Address student motivation

The assignment **directly addresses** students. It explains the **intended learning outcomes** and piques the students' **interest**.

The rationale for the assignment itself and its relation to the intended learning outcomes may be obvious to you. Students, however, may not yet be able to draw these connections, particularly if they have little to no prior experience and are in the process of getting oriented in their respective disciplines and the academic world more generally. You can help students by clearly positioning assignments within the context of a course, within the intended learning outcomes, or even within the disciplinary landscape. Students need to understand the significance of an assignment, which can boost their motivation.

2.3 Explain the evaluation criteria and feedback procedures

A good assignment contains concrete information on **what** (process, drafts, final versions or results) will be assessed **based on what criteria**, as well as if, and to what extent, this evaluation will be **part of the final grade**.

Students also receive information on **when, by whom** and **on what** feedback will be offered, as well as **what you expect students to do with it**. (Are students expected to incorporate the feedback into their subsequent work or is it merely a reaction to a task?)

Evaluation criteria that you communicate in advance or even develop together with your students help them understand what aspects of the assignment they should focus on. This helps to avoid misunderstandings. Students benefit from feedback in general, especially when they receive it early in the working process. Here is an **example**: Students are often under the false impression that formal criteria are the most important part of a written work. Supplying students with criteria that give greater weight to content-related elements will communicate that this is not the case.

2.4. Clearly communicate deadlines and resources

Ideally, you discuss the assignment with your students and provide a **written version** (e.g. as a print-out or on Moodle). An assignment should always include information on deadlines, how students should **hand it in**, as well as on guidelines on **formal aspects**. Furthermore, we recommend that you establish when, and to what extent, you are available to answer questions.

3. Tips on Formulating Assignments

When you draft an assignment, it is essential that you **describe**, and if necessary explain, the **actions** required to complete the tasks. Describe these tasks using dynamic verbs such as discuss, illustrate or solve. Use these verbs as **early as possible** in the assignment, since different **actions** are associated with **different expectations and skills**.

Avoid ambiguous or vague verbs such as *treat*, or *research*. The same applies to nominalisations (such as *discussion* and *exploration*). However, we strongly suggest using the **verb form** because it is more appropriate to communicate the **active nature** of assignments.

Make sure to describe the necessary tasks **precisely** and **unambiguously**. A good assignment also considers **discipline-specific notions** of tasks such as *analyse*. If you are not sure whether your students have sufficient knowledge about, or experience with, exercises such as "critical discussion," define *discussing* in the assignment, or break it down into smaller tasks.

Action verbs correspond to various competency or complexity levels:[4]

1	**Writing prompts:** *formulate, draft, etc.*
2	**Reproducing content:** *name, list, state, describe, summarise, etc.*
3	**Reorganising and transferring content:** *compare, explain, classify, structure, analyse, etc.*
4	**Reflecting, making an argument or problem solving:** *interpret, evaluate, discuss, review, assess, develop, create, etc.*

Complex actions require the use of simpler ones (low complexity level), or they combine two or more, e.g. *discussing* requires *stating or presenting* and possibly *comparing*.

4. Additional Tips

- We recommend to split **large tasks** into **several smaller ones**, especially when an assignment involves complex tasks. This enables you to keep up with your students' progress and solve problems that may arise during early working stages. If you choose to assign a number of smaller tasks, make sure to highlight the **relevance of these tasks for the intended learning outcomes**, so students do not lose sight of the larger picture.

- Some teachers provide **model solutions/assignments/papers**. If you decide to do so, you should always offer **at least two of each**. If students only see one example, they are more likely to imitate it. In addition, some teachers provide an example of student work **that did not meet the requirements**. All examples should be discussed so that the students understand what elements were especially successful or unsuccessful. Students should not receive examples without any commentary.

- If you get the impression that students are underperforming because of a lack of motivation, you may find it helpful to create assignments that **relate to the lives** of students. **Real-world questions and problems** help students understand the **relevance** of a particular assignment.

- **Allowing students to have a say** in the choice of assignment can also motivate them. One option is to put the choice of assignment(s) to a vote. Or, students may choose individual assignments from a list. In the latter case, make sure that the most important assignments remain mandatory (e.g. term papers). Furthermore, the choice of assignments should be of equal difficulty, so that students are not tempted to choose assignments that require the least amount of work.[5]

- As is the case with any written work, teachers improve assignments by **revising** them several times. You can ask colleagues, for instance tutors, for feedback. Moreover, **student performances** sometimes reveal common problems. Finally, you can **ask your students** for feedback on the assignments during class or via Moodle (activity: feedback), or consult the course evaluation results.

5. Considerations for Developing Assignments

You may find it helpful to consult the worksheet on page 8 and 9 in Deborah DeZure's classic article ***Structuring Assignments for Success*** (http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/teachingLibrary/ Assignments/structuringassignments-forsuccess.pdf). The considerations presented in this worksheet may overlap with questions that students typically ask. Therefore, this worksheet can also help you prepare for meetings and class discussions.

Please note: *Not every consideration in this worksheet is relevant to every assignment — please choose the ones most relevant to you and adapt them to your specific teaching needs.*

Further reading:

More thoughts on, and tips for, developing writing assignments are available in John C. Bean. Engaging Ideas: *The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

References

[1] See DeZure, Deborah. „Structuring Assignments for Success". *Whys and Ways of Teaching* 9, no. 1 (Feb. 1999): 1–10. http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/teachingLibrary/Assignments/structuringassignments-forsuccess.pdf [last accessed 03.01.2020].

[2] Landwehr, Norbert, and Elisabeth Müller. *Begleitetes Selbststudium*. Didaktische Grundlagen und Umsetzungshilfen. 2nd ed. Bern: hep, 2008.

[3] Middendorf, Joan, und David Pace. „Decoding the disciplines: A model for helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking". *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 98 (Summer 2004): 1–12. doi.org/10.1002/tl.142 (https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.142).

[4] Anderson, Lorin W., and David R. Krathwohl, eds. *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman, 2001.

[5] See, for example, Weimer, Maryellen. „Adding Choice to Assignment Options: A Few Course Design Considerations." *Faculty Focus*, 20. 02.2014. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/adding-choices-assignment-options-course-design-considerations [last accessed on 13.08.2019]; for an example from microbiology see LaGier, Michael. „Using Assignment Choice to Promote Course Relevancy." Faculty Focus, 23.02.2018. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/using-assignment-choice-to-promote-course-relevancy [last accessed on 13.08.2019].

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