Writing to Students

Part 1: Designing Assignments and Crafting Prompts

The Writing Center is here to support you in communicating with your students effectively and to brainstorm with you as you modulate your courses, assignments, and activities for an online environment.

Helping students feel connected to and supported by you in a remote environment may take more conscious effort on your part than when you are together in person, being your animated, engaged, non-virtual selves. As [*The Chronicle*](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching)recommends, in writing to students in an online class--whether in lectures, announcements, assignments, feedback, or contributions to discussions--strive to communicate in your own voice; try to express in writing the aspects of yourself that cannot be captured by “plain text”: your intonation, your humor, your facial expressions. “Infuse your writing with warmth,” “be human,” and “practice immediacy” ([Essential Practice](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching#1) #2 of 10).

When working in an online environment, it is especially important to make your assignments *clear* to your students, to make your expectations *explicit*, and to suggest *processes* your students might use to produce what you are asking them to produce. Your students will be grateful if you make clear *what* you are asking your students to do, *why*, and *how* they might go about doing it. What follows is a set of suggestions and things to consider as you craft (or re-craft) assignments and activities for students.

Effective Prompts Often...

Frame or contextualize the question, problem, or task at hand.

Make clear both the purpose of the assignment and the purpose of the student’s paper. (What is the purpose of writing the paper, and what do you expect the paper to *do*?)

Offer a process. (Often the final product will build on earlier, lower-stakes assignments.)

Distinguish the main question or task from the sub-questions or smaller tasks that will help the student to answer the larger question or perform the larger task.

Suggest (but do not dictate) a shape for the essay; if the student does the steps in order or answers the questions in order and does so coherently, the essay will develop well from beginning ot middle to end.

Have been revised (sometimes in response to feedback).

Questions to Consider in Designing Assignments

How does this particular assignment fit into the larger scheme of the course? What is its specific purpose, and how does that specific purpose fit into the larger aims of the course?

Why am I asking students to do this assignment? What do I hope they will gain from doing it? What do I want them to learn?

What, specifically, am I asking students to do? Experiment with different verbs, such as *explain, analyze, compare, evaluate, interpret, argue*. (See Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy.)

How do I expect my students to go about producing what I am are asking them to produce? What steps will they take along the way?

How will I prepare them to perform the task I am asking them to do?

Quick Strategies for Generating Ideas & Language for a Clear and Effective Prompt

Fastwrite a letter to your students, explaining to them:

What you are asking them to do, and why.

How you suggest they go about producing what you are asking them to produce.

Think through and jot notes on the steps you would have to take in order to do what you are asking them to do.

Things to Consider While Polishing a Prompt

The order in which to present your ideas.

How you present your ideas. Will headings be useful to distinguish between the functions of different parts of your prompt? Will headings, spacing, italics, or bullet points make it easier for students to understand what you are asking? Are you giving them so much information that it is difficult to take in?

Are you asking a series of questions without making clear the big question or purpose of the assignment?

In your efforts to be clear, are you guiding students to do a series of tasks or answer a series of questions without developing a sense of a coherent, purposeful whole? (Watch out for numbered lists, lists that might as well be numbered, words such as “first,” “then.”)

Assignment Test Run (of your own assignment or of a partner’s)

1. Put yourself in the position of the reader/student, who will then have to actually do the assignment.

2. Read the prompt carefully. Think about what it is asking you to do, how, and why.

3. Imagine (and jot some notes on) how you would approach the assignment if you had to do it. What steps would you take? How would you go about producing the desired end result?

4. Take a stab at starting the assignment, even if you have no knowledge of the subject area. You might quickly draft an opening paragraph or scene; map out the sections of your imagined paper (thinking perhaps more about what each section would *do* than about what each might *say*); or just make up a bit of what you might say in the paper.

Giving and Receiving Descriptive Feedback on a Partner’s Prompt

1. *Describe* your understanding of the assignment writer is asking her student to do, why, and how.

2. Assignment Writer Responds: Why yes, that’s exactly what I wanted them to do, why, and how! OR Well, what I actually want them to do is… OR Hmm. Maybe I should let them know what the purpose of the assignment is.

3. Share out loud and discuss how you responded to the assignment. What insight did you gain from imagining yourself responding to the assignment? From hearing your colleague’s response?

4. Discuss additional questions the writer has about his assignment.