

CRAFTING WRITING PROMPTS

Writing assignments serve to give students an opportunity to demonstrate skills, reinforce knowledge taught previously, and/or complete tasks that lead to upcoming learning or projects. Assignment prompts explain to students what the expectations are for the task, give instructions to help them successfully complete the task, and inform them how the work will be evaluated.

This handout highlights the key information that strong assignment prompts include to answer students' questions and support them as they work.

ASSIGNMENT CONTEXT

When students realize how the class activities/readings are related to their assignment, they are more likely to consciously transfer previously acquired knowledge, processes, and skills. Questions to answer include the following:

- What were the goals of the previous assignment? How does this one build off of that?
- What are the goals of the assignment that comes after this one? How does this one help prepare students for that one?
- What class activities or readings relate to this assignment?

By clarifying how this assignment benefits their learning within (and beyond) the course, students are often more motivated to complete the work to reach that goal.

- How does this assignment benefit the students' learning?
- What skills are they developing in this assignment? What skills are they reinforcing?

Any assignment should be designed to meet some of the course learning outcomes. Confirming which one(s) this assignment meets can help you determine whether it is the best assessment tool for that outcome, or in general.

- Which course outcome(s) does this assignment meet?

NECESSARY CONTENT

It is vital to explain the meaning/purpose of the task. Consider the writing and thinking you want students to do, the specific tasks to be completed, or the questions to be asked or answered. Use specific language to articulate those requirements (e.g., analyze, summarize, compare).

- What should students learn or do in this assignment?

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Look to the grading criteria or rubric. Explain that what you want students to learn/do is at the center of your assessment protocols and share those criteria with them. If you do not have grading criteria or a rubric, you can build one by articulating these concepts/acts as assessment points.

- What is being assessed? What are your expectations? What will you be looking for in their writing?

Articulate what parts of the writing process students should fulfill, in particular if you are asking for outlines, abstracts, drafts, etc. along the way to the final submission.

- What prewriting/brainstorming activities should students spend time doing?
- What writing/drafting activities should students spend time doing?
- What revising/editing activities should students spend time doing?
- What reflection activities should students spend time doing?

Identify format, genre, and audience criteria that will help students make successful decisions as they write.

- Who are they writing to? What does that audience know or not know about the topic?
- Is there a particular organization/structure they should follow?
- Is there a particular tone or writing style they should aim for?
- What types of sources should be used?
- What style guide should be used for formatting pages and citations?
- How long should the paper be?
- What other document design elements should be included or avoided?

Include the schedule so students can manage their time appropriately.

- When is the final deadline? Are there earlier deadlines for outlines, abstracts, drafts, etc.?
- What activities (peer reviews, writing center or library visits, etc.) are associated with the timeline?

CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS

Be clear about what you do and do not want.

- Include only information the students need; if you provide questions to help with brainstorming or organizing, make clear whether all of those must be answered in the paper or not
- Refer explicitly to skills/assignments/readings that have been discussed explicitly in the course
- Define terms—they can mean different things depending on the context, discipline, and audience

Consider design: Make sure the prompt is organized logically and easy to read with clear visual markers to help students locate important information.

Try writing the paper yourself. Where do your instructions create potential confusion?

Ask a colleague to review your assignment handout or visit the Writing Center so a consultant can give you an idea of how your students might read and understand your expectations.

If using peer review, give students specific questions to answer that are directly related to the rubric or other grading criteria that you will use to evaluate their writing.