T2
Designing effective assignments

The quality of student writing can sometimes reflect the quality of the assignment. Clear, meaningful assignments often lead to insightful responses and student investment. Vague or confusing assignments may frustrate students or distract them from the course's objectives, thwarting growth and achievement. The advice in this topic will help you craft assignments that provide guidance and support for your students.

Determining the objectives of an assignment

Each assignment is an opportunity for students to show what they have learned and to move toward the designated outcomes for your course. Before creating an assignment, consider your students’ experience level and which of the course objectives they are prepared to fulfill. The assignment outcomes should mirror one or more of these course objectives.

Remember that students probably will not be prepared to fulfill all the objectives from the start of the term but instead will need to build skills slowly. Consider the chart on setting assignment objectives (p. 2), which shows the correlation between course objectives and two assignments in a freshman-level course. The first assignment, a beginning analytical essay, requires students to focus on a few basic course objectives: showing reading comprehension, writing a thesis sentence and topic sentences, developing paragraphs, and using the writing process. The second assignment, a final research project that is the fifth assignment in the course, shifts to more advanced course objectives. These objectives, which include evaluating sources, using citation conventions, and writing a research paper, can be accomplished only after students have developed a solid foundation in basic essay writing.
Setting assignment objectives that help students accomplish course objectives

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<tr>
<th>THE COURSE</th>
<th>THE ASSIGNMENTS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student objectives for a first-year course</td>
<td>Student objectives for a beginning analytical essay (Assignment 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read and show comprehension of college-level texts</td>
<td>Write a thesis in response to an analytical prompt</td>
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<td>Formulate an effective thesis statement for analytical essays</td>
<td>Develop the essay with paragraphs that use topic sentences to support the thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop essays with paragraphs that support the thesis; write paragraphs that include details and concrete evidence to support generalizations (topic sentences)</td>
<td>Use evidence from the source text to support the thesis and topic sentences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use the writing process to draft, revise, and edit materials</td>
<td>Draft, revise, and edit the paper</td>
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<tr>
<th>BASIC SKILLS</th>
<th>INTERMEDIATE SKILLS</th>
<th>ADVANCED SKILLS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Formulate an effective thesis for at least one argumentative research essay</td>
<td>Articulate a clear position that can be backed by research</td>
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<td>Learn to conduct research and evaluate sources</td>
<td>Integrate at least five credible sources in the paper</td>
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<td>Show skill in using MLA style for page formatting, in-text citations, and a list of works cited</td>
<td>Format the paper in MLA style; include in-text citations and a list of works cited</td>
<td></td>
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Choosing a topic and crafting an assignment

After spending some time with your students, you will be the best judge of which topics will engage their interests and help them achieve course objectives. However, if you are just starting the semester, you may want to consult your course reader for inspiration or ask seasoned instructors in your department for sample assignments.

Once you have determined the objectives for an assignment and chosen the topic, you will be prepared to draft the wording of the overview, the first part of the assignment. The overview typically takes the form of questions, specific prompts, or open-ended prompts.

Sample assignment overviews

Questions
Write a well-focused five-paragraph essay on the following question:

In the article “Surfing’s Up and Grades Are Down,” Rene Sanchez examines the effects that computers have on college students’ education and lives. What are some of the negative effects that computers can have on students’ academic success, according to the author? Support your answer with specific details from the text.

Specific prompts
Develop a two- to three-page essay on the following prompt:

In “Weasel Words,” William Lutz shows how advertisers use different types of misleading words to encourage people to buy their products. Explain how “weasel words” used in advertising distort the truth, according to Lutz.

Open-ended prompts
Write a six- to eight-page research paper about a topic related to your major or intended career. The thesis of your paper should argue for a change in a specific approach or policy. Use at least five credible sources to support your thesis. Format your paper using MLA style conventions.

Novice writers working on beginning-level assignments often benefit from narrow, straightforward questions or prompts that help them focus their thoughts. Advanced writers who have had practice articulating thesis statements and developing ideas in cohesive essays can often handle more open-ended projects.

As you draft the assignment overview, make the goals and outcomes explicit. Doing so will help you create an assignment within the students’ skill range and avoid setting goals that students are not yet equipped to meet. Specifically, include key terms relevant to your course or subject, directives (such as discuss, explain, analyze, argue, trace, compare, contrast, and synthesize), and other guidelines (such as support your response with at least three examples from the text) that clarify the purpose of the assignment. In class, take time to explain the key terms and directives to your students, who might not fully understand what words such as trace or synthesize entail.
Creating a sequence of steps within an assignment and integrating the handbook

When you design the steps of an assignment, split the larger tasks into manageable chunks and set a due date for each step. Provide several checkpoints—especially for research projects and longer analysis papers—so that students can receive guidance from you or from their peers long before their final drafts are due. Dividing assignments into smaller steps will help students avoid both procrastination and plagiarism.

The objectives you have already established for the project will help you determine the specific steps to assign. Depending on the assignment outcomes and your students’ needs, you can set due dates for individual student tasks such as a project topic, a tentative thesis, an outline, a list of sources, and multiple drafts. The following chart provides a sample sequence of lesson steps and student tasks leading to a final research project.

### Sequencing the steps of an assignment

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<tr>
<th>LESSON STEPS</th>
<th>STUDENT TASKS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Discuss the handbook’s coverage of choosing a topic and review the sample research paper.</strong></td>
<td>Develop a list of three to five possible topics. Exchange feedback in a peer review session.</td>
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<td><strong>2. Discuss thesis statements. Practice with the handbook’s print or online thesis exercises.</strong></td>
<td>Settle on a topic and write a tentative thesis. Submit the thesis to the instructor for preliminary approval.</td>
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<td><strong>3. Discuss the handbook sections on conducting research and evaluating sources.</strong></td>
<td>Find at least five sources. Bring them to class for a source-evaluation workshop.</td>
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<td><strong>4. Review the handbook’s coverage of end citations and complete related exercises in class.</strong></td>
<td>Create a list of end citations for your sources. Submit it to the instructor for feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5. Review sample outlines in the handbook and discuss tips on organizing information.</strong></td>
<td>Create a tentative outline. Receive feedback in a peer review session.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Review the handbook section on making global revisions.</strong></td>
<td>Bring your first draft to class for a peer review session. Focus on global issues.</td>
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Providing explicit instructions

Teaching with Hacker Handbooks: Topics, Strategies, and Lesson Plans
by Marcy Carbajal Van Horn (Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010).

After you have drafted the assignment overview and determined the individual tasks your students will undertake, create explicit instructions for students to follow. To provide thorough support, include the following:

- An overview of the assignment (the question or prompt, including the specific objectives of the assignment)
- A brief explanation of the purpose of the assignment, showing how it relates to the outcomes of the course
- A list of the required tasks and their due dates
- Specific formatting and submission requirements, if any
- Evaluation guidelines (such as a list of the specific features of a successful paper or a copy of the rubric you will use to assess the work)
- A list of extra tips or resources, such as relevant sections of the handbook, to which students can refer during the writing process

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<th>7. Discuss the handbook sections on integrating sources, avoiding plagiarism, and revising sentences.</th>
<th>Bring your second draft to class for a peer review session. Focus on in-text citations and sentence-level editing.</th>
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<tr>
<td>8. Ask students to share specific editing challenges. Review topics and discuss corresponding print or online handbook exercises.</td>
<td>Proofread your final draft and submit it for evaluation.</td>
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ENG 101
Assignment 2: Text Analysis Essay

Overview [[Insert anno AI-2a]]
In standard written English, write a five-paragraph academic essay using MLA conventions for formatting, in-text citations, and a works cited list. Your essay should respond directly to the following prompt and must include properly cited direct quotations and paraphrases.

Prompt: In "The Roots of War," Barbara Ehrenreich compares war to "an infectious disease." How are war and disease alike, according to Ehrenreich? Is this an appropriate, reasonable metaphor?

Purpose
The purpose of this assignment is to give you practice using MLA conventions for formatting, quoting, paraphrasing, and documenting sources. This assignment builds on the basic essay-writing skills you learned in Assignment 1.

Due dates for assignment tasks
(Note: TBH = The Bedford Handbook)
9/1: Tentative thesis statement and rough outline (see 50a and 50b in TBH)
9/3: List of possible sources: must include citation information
9/5: Preliminary draft (#1): must include at least a thesis statement and body paragraphs
9/10: Revised draft (#2): must include the introduction, body, and conclusion
9/15: Final draft (#3)

Evaluation guidelines
Excellent (A grade) papers will display the following characteristics:
• A thesis that clearly states your position on the topic
• Body paragraphs that support the thesis effectively
• Fluidly integrated in-text citations for both direct quotations and paraphrases
• An organizational pattern that advances the thesis and suits your purpose and audience
• Carefully crafted sentences in standard academic English
• An accurate works cited list and page formatting in MLA style

Extra help
• Review the information on integrating sources and avoiding plagiarism (see 51 and 52 in TBH).
• If you have any specific questions about your draft, stop by my office (Johnston Hall, 156-B) during my office hours or visit the Writing Center in LeCrone Hall, Room 204.