

Transparent Assignments: Discussion Questions

Examples:

The authors of these four introductory-level college assignment prompts revised them in an effort to make the assignments more transparent, relevant and accessible for students. These assignments were part of a study that associated more transparent assignment prompts with improved outcomes for students, including increased persistence rates up to two years later, as well as elevated academic confidence, belonging and awareness of skill mastery reported by students ([Calkins and Winkelmess, 2018](#)).

Example A: Sociology

Example B: Science 101

Example C: Psychology

Example D: Communications

Discussion Questions:

The following questions can be used to frame a conversation about Examples A-D and many other assignment prompts.

Purpose

- How would you revise the purpose statement to show students that the skills and knowledge they will gain from doing this assignment are relevant and useful for students' lives beyond the context of the assignment, the course, and the students' college experience?
- Can you identify specific post-college scenarios or conditions where students would value having the target skills and knowledge?
- The purpose in Example D (less transparent version) is difficult to find. How can you or a colleague (or a student) be sure that you have identified the most important skills for the student to practice, and the most important knowledge for a student to gain from doing the assignment?
- Can you improve upon the purpose statement in Example B (more transparent version) to make it more relevant/accessible/motivating to non-science majors?
- How much information is enough and helpful as opposed to excessive and overwhelming for an introductory-level student? An advanced student?
- When would students benefit from recognizing how the purpose of an individual assignment connects with the overall purpose of the course? How can you clarify this alignment between the assignment and the course in the purpose statement?
- If an introductory-level student can focus on assessing their development of one or two new disciplinary skills at the same time, how many more skills can an intermediate or advanced student or a graduate student actively perform and assess simultaneously?
- How can feedback on assignments engage students in practicing important skills more effectively?
- How much feedback is appropriate for students at various levels of expertise? How much feedback is overwhelming and counterproductive?

- How can you target your feedback to the specific skills students are focusing on so that they improve those skills, before you focus their attention on practicing more complex operations that depend on those target skills?
- The purpose statements in Examples A-D (more transparent versions) were effective for most students in the 2018 study. How would you revise the purpose statements to make them more transparent, relevant, and motivating for students who are trying to identify the life-long learning value of the assignment?
- How would you confirm that all students have a clear and equal understanding of the purpose?

Task

- Many assignment prompts focus almost exclusively on the task. It doesn't take a lot of effort to add statements about the purpose and criteria. How many of the assignments you have encountered or created focus entirely on the task, omitting details about the purpose and criteria for the students' work?
- How can you divide the task into sub-sections that target a small number of skills simultaneously?
- When revising their assignments to offer greater transparency, many instructors divide all the tasks into several smaller assignments that fit together into a larger project. Example D (the more transparent version) summarizes three scaffolded assignments. In what contexts is this sort of scaffolding effective vs. redundant?
- How might a scaffolded assignment help you direct your feedback to specific skills sets that students are developing.
- How much detail in the task section of an assignment prompt is helpful for introductory-level students vs. advanced-level or graduate students?
- If you want students to invent their own approach to the task, without following specified actions, how will you indicate that confusion and creativity are an expected part of the task that will have specific, important value for the students?
- How would you confirm that all students have a clear and equal understanding of the task?

Criteria

- How much detail about the criteria for successful work is helpful for a low-stakes, in-class activity vs. a high-stakes, graded assignment?
- How would you confirm that all students have a clear and equal understanding of the criteria for success in Example B (more transparent version)?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of providing a simple checklist of criteria vs. a detailed rubric for evaluating the success with which students carry out the target skills? Do students all understand the words on the rubric or checklist the same way?
- Why are examples of past students' work less relevant and less motivating for students than post-college, contemporary illustrations of what it looks like when the target skills are carried out successfully and/or unsuccessfully in a non-academic or academic context?
- Where can you find multiple examples of what the target skills look like in real-world settings: a video clip from a performance or interview, a local engineering or

construction project, a paragraph from a newspaper vs. a paragraph from a scholarly journal? Asking students to critique multiple examples in class with your guidance can help them identify what the target skills look like when they are executed effectively and ineffectively. This improves students' capacity to evaluate the quality of their own work while it is underway.

- How can you engage students in identifying what makes some examples stronger than others?