

The Unwritten Rules:

Decode Your Assignments and Decipher What's Expected of You

Before you begin working on an assignment or class activity, ask the instructor to help you understand the following. Bring this document to frame the conversation.

Purpose

- Skills you'll practice by doing this assignment
- Knowledge you'll gain from doing this assignment
- How you can use these in your life beyond the context of this course, now and after college?

Task

- What to do. What roadblocks or mistakes should you avoid?
- How to do it. Is there a recommended process? Is the process intentionally unclear? If so, how does that support your learning?

Criteria

- Checklist. Are you on the right track? How will you know you're doing what's expected? How will you know you're doing high quality work? How will you evaluate and improve your work before submitting it?
- Examples of real-world work in this field. Discuss with your instructor what's good or lacking about the examples. Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.

Did you know?

- Researchers demonstrated in a national study that transparency around academic assignments enhances students' success, with even greater gains for underserved students (including first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students). [Winkelmes et al. 2016]
- When teachers communicate back and forth with students to ensure students share an understanding of the purpose, tasks and criteria for their work before they begin it, students are more likely to experience greater academic success with that assignment, developing the knowledge, disposition, and skills necessary to succeed both at school and in life (in comparison to when students experience less clarity around purpose, tasks and criteria for their academic work). [Winkelmes et al. 2016, 2019]
- For University of Nevada Las Vegas students, benefits included a significantly higher rate of returning to college the following two years. [Gianoutsos & Winkelmes 2016; Calkins & Winkelmes 2018].
- An inclusive learning environment benefits all students and offers more equitable learning opportunities for underserved students. Research links college students' academic confidence and sense of belonging with higher grades, GPAs, persistence, and retention rates. [Walton & Cohen 2011, Walton & Brady 2021]
- College students increased their test scores when supported by a system that advocated the belief that intelligence is not fixed but rather malleable. A year later, these students were 80% less likely to drop out of college [Aronson et al, 2002].

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