Tips for Clearer Assignments

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Teaching and Learning Services

Benefits of Clearer Assignments

Intuitively, we know that clarity is a key part of communication. In fact, we often include clarity as part of our marking rubrics. But why is clarity important? Titsworth and Mazer (2016) describe clarity in educational settings as behaviours that a teacher does to assist "students in selecting, understanding, and remembering the structure and details of information" (p. 112). While we can likely all agree that clarity is important, we sometimes forget that what is clear to us, may not be clear to our students, after all they're still learning.

Focusing on clarity can help us design more effective assignments. Blumberg (2009) argues that striving for clarity often leads to alignment between learning outcomes for specific topics, teaching methods, and assessments. In addition, when information is well organized, students can more easily select the relevant details. And when the information is grouped (or chunked as we'll see on the next page), it may be easier for students to process the information in their short-term memory. This means that they will potentially be able to store more information within their short-term memory, before integrating it into their long-term memory.

A simple thing to add into your assignment descriptions is notes about the formatting such as single- or double-spaced, header/footer content, acceptable formats and the consequences of not using them, and suggested file naming (e.g., JDoe-ENGL100-Ass1). These tips will help guide the students and will hopefully make it easier for you to mark efficiently.

We have a template to get you started on clarifying your assignments. You may not need to use all the different sections, but they are included to help you think about what information you should be providing. You can find the template at http://bit.ly/AssignmentTemplate.

Remember: Clarity is determined by the listener, reader, or viewer, not by the creator. If in doubt, have a colleague (or two) read over your assignment.

Resources

Blumberg, P. (2009). Maximizing learning through course alignment and experience with different types of knowledge. *Innovative Higher Education, 34*, 93-103. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-009-9095-2

Titsworth, S. & Mazer, J. P. (2016). Teacher clarity: An analysis of current research and future directions. In P. Witt (Ed.), *Communication and Learning* (pp. 84-100). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

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5 Tips to Get Better Assignments

Include a purpose statement that shows the relationship between the assignment and the course learning outcomes or goals.

There is a reason that you have decided on this particular assignment. That reason is connected to the overall learning that students are doing in the class and what they need to demonstrate, the learning outcomes. But if you don't point this connection out to students, they may not be able to find it for themselves. This can lead the students to wander through the course with their assignment (inhibiting their own clarity in the end) or they might unintentionally focus on the wrong thing. Understanding the purpose of an assignment can also support students as they develop their metacognition (awareness of their own thought processes).

Locate the assignment within the course.

While you have the big picture for the course, students are typically operating with more immediate knowledge. By indicating to students where an assignment fits within the course, they will be better able to see what course knowledge applies. For example, you may indicate that they should start the assignment after they read a particular chapter, or at what point they have covered all the material they need for an assignment. This supports their metacognition and their ability to move information from their short-term to their long-term memory.

Chunk the details.

Use headings and subheadings to chunk or organize the information for the assignment into smaller sections. This will help students process the different requirements of the assignment and will help them find pertinent details when they need them.

Keep the means and the goals separate.

Sometimes the purpose of the assignment can get lost in the format of the assignment. For example, if you ask students to write a paper that demonstrates their ability to analyze the consequences of an historical event, are you grading them on their analysis or their ability to communicate their analysis in written format? By being clear on what the goals of the assignment are, you may be able to open up the formats that students can use to demonstrate their achievement of those goals. This helps to meet the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) as well.

Provide details on how and what you will be marking.

Well developed rubrics are incredibly helpful for students to understand what is required in an assignment. You can add to this or build up to it by including a summary list of everything that is required within an assignment for them to use as a checklist as they complete and review their submission.

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