

# Designing Assignments and Presenting Them to Students

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Here are some ways of letting students learn your subject through writing about it, while also developing their writing skills. Designing your assignments with learning in mind is the single most important way you can support students' development as writers. Research on student learning demonstrates that many problems of language use and reasoning dissipate when students are engaged with their subject matter and are aware of their purposes for writing. Plagiarism also decreases when students can see a pathway to success. (See our page [Deterring Plagiarism](#) for more discussion of assignment design.)

**NOTE:** The page [Books and Articles about Writing in the Disciplines](#) lists a number of publications with further suggestions and examples for assignment design: see especially the books by Bean, Walvoord and Anderson, and Wright and Herteis. The research basis for these ideas is evident in the works by Beyer et al., Light, Russell (2001), and Thaiss and Zawacki.

## Assignment Prompts: Telling Students What You Want

1. Keep showing how writing is used for learning and thinking in your discipline:  
e.g., by commenting on the ways knowledge is produced and disseminated in your field, by analysing the style and organization of course readings, by asking invited speakers about their writing practices  
e.g., by mentioning your own use of writing as a way to develop ideas and discuss them with others.
2. Create assignment prompts that refer explicitly to elements in the course:  
**e.g.**, "apply what you have learned about theories of deviance," "formulate a hypothesis as defined in Lab 4," "locate this article's position in the current arguments about X."
3. Ask questions that will lead students beyond mere summary or replication of sources:  
**e.g.**, "Critically evaluate which of the two levels of analysis offers the best explanation for war," "Choose an important detail or key word and show its function in the novel," "To what extent is statement A true?"
4. Ask students for various modes of writing to help students move beyond formulaic patterns such as the five-paragraph essay and develop experience in writing for different audiences:  
**e.g.**, microthemes (concise pieces of 150-200 words): abstract of a required reading, summary of one side of a controversy, interpretation of given set of data, solution of a quandary  
**e.g.**, non-linear genres: response journals to readings or field work, diagrams, posters, cartoons, videos, blogs (NOTE: specify whether and how to document sources)  
**e.g.**, real-world genres (especially of types seen in course readings): government briefing paper, environmental impact statement, museum display notes, manual for clients or the public (again, specify whether academic documentation is required).

5. Describe success in realistic and understandable terms:  
**e.g.**, by formulating grading criteria (perhaps as a rubric with numerical values, a checklist of specific expectations, a description of good work, or a description by grade levels)  
**e.g.**, by showing examples of past student writing with comments on what makes them good—or improvable.
6. Define the reader (and thus a role for the writer)—not always yourself or your TA:  
**e.g.**, "explain to other students in your class who have not read the work," "write as a scientific expert to managers who do not all have your expertise," "advise the foreign minister of Lower Slabovia," "be a director before rehearsals begin."
7. Help students avoid pitfalls by anticipating their questions and assumptions (keeping in mind that practices may differ greatly among courses they are taking):  
**e.g.**, about narrowing of topics, use and placement of thesis statement, first-person references, types of sources expected, documentation system required.

**NOTE:** Specifications like those in points 5-7 can sometimes be set out in appendices or separate pages to avoid overloading the instructions; some should also be explained or demonstrated orally.

### **Presenting Assignments: Reinforcing Students' Motivation**

8. Ensure that students have a chance to apply your feedback and learn from trial and error:  
**e.g.**, by scaffolding a sequence of assignments (summary of one article, comparison of two, then analysis of three or more)  
**e.g.**, by structuring larger assignments in two or more stages (proposal, first draft, revised draft; introduction and thesis statement, then full paper).
9. Give students many chances at writing and being read, starting early in the course, and sometimes ungraded or for only a few marks:  
**e.g.**, by asking for two-minute papers or exit notes at the end of a lecture or tutorial (What was the clearest point today? the muddiest point?), then reading the set through quickly and commenting on what was said at the start of the next class.
10. Demonstrate what you mean by the logical or cognitive operations you name (discuss, analyse/synthesize, compare/contrast, criticize, evaluate, etc.); Instructional librarians and writing specialists are sometimes available to visit your class to help in these sessions.  
**e.g.**, by drawing diagrams on the board, by outlining a good answer, by citing published models, by commenting on the organizational patterns in course readings, by leading class or tutorial exercises that practice the operations  
**e.g.**, by using some class time to show and practice ways of understanding and developing assignment topics (focussing broad topics, generating lists of potential questions and controversies in specific topics, using search terms to find relevant resources).
11. Similarly, let students know what you expect when you name a genre of writing (essay, report, book

review, peer review, literature review, annotated bibliography, journal, journal article, critical response, reflective response, case study, blog, brief, memo):

**e.g.**, by describing its function in the discipline and/or profession (including types of readers), noting differences in function and form from high school or from other courses, supplying examples and noting range of adaptations.

### **Coaching Through the Process: Getting Students to Take Responsibility**

12. Ask students to write or talk briefly in class about their progress and discoveries as they work on longer projects. Expressing anxieties can lead to discussion of possible strategies.
13. Suggest that students write focus statements periodically as they draft, for themselves or as part of class exercises: state briefly why they have included a particular point, what they want to say about it, and why that is worth saying. These exercises can help both those who are blocked and those who ramble, and they can reassure the anxious that they have something to say.
14. Structure peer review sessions (in class or online) so students respond to each other as authentic readers in the discipline, not just untrained proofreaders. You can ask pairs of students to look briefly at an excerpt from each other's work (e.g., a first paragraph or an outline), then challenge them each to summarize what they remember. Or for longer projects, ask students to look at each other's drafts in class or online and answer simple focussed questions: "What was the most interesting idea in this piece?" "What points need clarifying?" "Did all sections of the paper relate to the stated thesis?"
15. Refuse to let students' problems of process become your problems of grading. Encourage students to consult you in office hours—it's easier to look at flawed drafts than mark awful final copies. Comment on cogency and coherence of reasoning, and note points where you genuinely can't follow the argument, then ask the student to come up with solutions. Find passages you can admire, say why, and ask the student for more of the same qualities.
16. Encourage all students to find and use other sources of writing instruction. The lefthand menu on the website [Writing at the University of Toronto](#) leads to information about **Writing Centres** and **Writing Courses** at U of T. The **News** and **Writing Plus** pages outline non-credit group instruction. Direct students also to relevant handouts in the **Advice** section.
17. Refer students to specialists when needed. Help is available at U of T for anxious students ([Academic Success Centre](#)), students with possible learning disabilities ([Accessibility Services](#): e.g., showing a striking discrepancy between oral and written performance), students facing challenges in learning English as a second or third or fourth language ([one of our FAQ pages](#) sets out the range of English Language Learning resources). Present your suggestion as opportunities to improve and develop, not as punishments. Then follow up by commenting on specific improvements and by asking students about their learning experiences.

This page is also available online at [www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty/designing-assignments](http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty/designing-assignments).