



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Designing & Evaluating Writing Assignments

The following advice is intended for faculty across schools, colleges, and campuses. The Writing Center's Director and Assistant Director are available to provide a) seminars/workshops on some or all of these practices; b) individual consultations on assignments, rubrics, or evaluative feedback; and/or c) didactic feedback on a small sampling of graded assignments. Please email Writing.Center@ucdenver.edu for more information.

Assignment Description/Prompt:

- Design a direct, precise assignment prompt that:
 - Makes clear the purpose, audience, and specific discipline/genre conventions
 - Is no more than one page single-spaced in length
 - Uses a single noun/descriptor for the assignment (e.g., policy memo, site analysis, literature review, etc.)
 - Uses no more than three verbs to describe outcomes (e.g., reflect, summarize, critique, etc.)
 - Explicitly outlines due date(s), citation style, format requirements, etc.
- Introduce, explain, and solicit questions about the prompt. For example:
 - Require students post a question in a Canvas Discussion.
 - Require students to read before class; then facilitate class discussion.
 - Have students in groups generate two questions for class discussion.

Rubrics:

- Design a rubric that clearly outlines the evaluative criteria you will use. For example:
 - **Content/Ideas:** Does it answer the question(s)/address the issue(s)? In what detail? Using how many examples?
 - **Thesis/Argument:** Does it need one? What should it look like?
 - **Organization:** What does logical, systematic organization look like?
 - **Evidence & Analysis:** Is quotation or paraphrase more appropriate? What level of analysis is necessary and what does it look like?
 - **Stylistic Conventions:** What are these in your discipline/genre? What citation style is expected? What exactly does "tone" mean?
 - **Grammar, Syntax, & Mechanics:** What are your expectations? How necessary is perfection? What weight does this hold in the grade?
- Introduce, explain, and solicit questions about the rubric and its use.

Assignment Examples:

- Consider providing students either a former-student example or published example reminiscent of the assignment (or both):
 - Annotate the example(s), pointing out strengths and weaknesses. (Example need not be perfect – students can learn just as much from a “good” example as from a “great” example.)
 - Solicit clarifying questions and provide explanation.
- Design an activity that applies the rubric to the example
 - Have students do this individually or in groups
 - Present your own completed rubric and explain your reasoning

Scaffolding

- Break up larger assignments into smaller parts. For example:
 - Proposals
 - Outlines
 - Multiple Drafts
- Teach discrete skills (corresponding to rubric categories) and evaluate student practice via smaller pre-assignments.
- Lower the stakes of preliminary assignments.
- Consider providing feedback at multiple steps.

Feedback/Rewrites

- Approach your feedback as a dialogue:
 - Grading becomes developmental instead of punitive
- Read the entire assignment before commenting:
 - Avoid scattered, reactionary commenting.
 - Comment strategically: Students can only absorb so many ideas.
 - Consider reading/commenting in multiple passes/reads (e.g., once for Higher Order Concerns such as ideas, organization, argument, and evidence/analysis and again for Lower Order Concerns such as grammar, style, and citation).
 - Comment on success: Students don't always know what they've done well and should continue doing.
 - Connect rubric items to specific places in the assignment.
 - Save time with electronic submissions and feedback.
- Consider offering opportunities for rewrite based on feedback:
 - Enforce a short timeframe for (optional) resubmission.
 - Require students to annotate their revisions and reflect upon what changed/why it's improved.
 - Explain how re-grading will work (Extra points? Averaging? Entirely new grade?).