

Developing Assignment Descriptions

Do you find that students do not perform as well as you expect on assignments, or that they don't always understand what you'd like them to do? This handout is designed to help you consider the content of the assignment description and include all of the information that students will need in order to be ready to tackle the assignment. Information from any or all of the following categories might be included in a complete, clear description of a project or assignment for which you will assign a grade. While not all of these categories may be relevant to every assignment, putting those that are relevant into your written description will help make your purposes and expectations clear to students.

Project overview

- In a sentence or two, what is the main gist of the assignment?

Purpose and Goal(s)

- Why are you asking students to complete this particular type of assignment?
- How will it help to prepare them for future classes or work and life after graduation?
- What should students learn, know or be able to do as a result of having completed this assignment?

Audience

- If there is a real or imagined audience for the product of the assignment other than you (the instructor), who is that audience? What aspects of the audience's background, values or concerns will students need to know about in order to orient their assignment output toward the audience?
- If this type of assignment mirrors work that professionals in the field typically produce, what values and concerns of the field/discipline produced the need for this type of work? How do professionals in the field judge the quality and completeness of the outcomes, i.e., how would they know when the assignment has been done right/well? Describing how and why this type of work is done in the "real world" can motivate students and help them to understand the discipline and become professionalized.

Process

- What steps will students need to complete, and in what order, to produce a good quality assignment?

Outline of the Product/Output of the Assignment

- What parts should the completed assignment include? For each major part or section, describe the content and purpose—what function does that part serve toward the goal of the entire assignment?
- Parameters—How many pages and what type of formatting should students follow?
- Sharing samples of past students' assignments can sometimes be helpful, especially if you include commentary about what aspects are done well and how it could have been improved.

Grading Scheme/Rubric

- By what criteria will the project be assessed? Are there several major categories of criteria? What is the relative weight or importance among the categories of assessment?

Due Dates

- Include due dates for the final output of the project, as well as any interim dates for drafts or parts of the assignment. Make any penalties for late submission explicit.

Developed by the Faculty Development Center at UMBC, 2014.