The Unwritten Rules:
Decode Your Assignments and
Decipher What's Expected of You

Did you know?

- UNLV researchers demonstrated in a national study that transparency around academic assignments enhances students’ success - especially that of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students -- at statistically significant levels (with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect for underserved students). [Winkelmes et al., Peer Review 2016]
- When faculty make the purpose, tasks and criteria of an academic assignment clear before students begin to work on 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., Peer Review 2016]
- For UNLV students, benefits also included a significantly higher rate of returning to college the following year. [Gianoutsos and Winkelmes, PADE Proceedings 2016].
- An inclusive learning environment benefits all students and offers more equitable learning opportunities for underserved students. Research on student learning links college students’ academic confidence and sense of belonging with higher GPAs, persistence and retention rates [Walton and Cohen, Science, 18 March, 2011].
- 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., Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 38, 2 (2002)].

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO:

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

Purpose
- Skills you’ll practice by doing this assignment
- Content knowledge you’ll gain from doing this assignment
- How you can use these in your life beyond the context of this course, in and beyond college

Task
- What to do
- How to do it (Are there recommended steps? What roadblocks/mistakes should you avoid?)

Criteria
- Checklist (Are you on the right track? How to know you’re doing what’s expected?)
- Annotated examples of successful work
  (What’s good about these examples? Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.)

DRAFT Checklist for Designing a Transparent Assignment

Thank you for helping to test this DRAFT checklist. Please send your suggestions and feedback to mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu

PURPOSE:

Skills
- Does your purpose statement specify a skill or skill set that students will gain from doing this assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular skill set to the larger context of:
  - recent topics of class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major? the discipline?
  - your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your purpose statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this skill to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

Knowledge
- Does your purpose statement specify content knowledge that students will practice while doing the assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular knowledge to examples/contexts where this skill was important in
  - recent class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major? the discipline?
  - your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college

Would this assignment benefit from segmenting it into several assignments, each one focused on a discrete set of skills that should be mastered to insure students’ successful completion of the next assignment in the sequence?

TASK:

- Does your description of the task:
  - Identify the very first thing students should do when they begin working on the assignment?
  - The very next thing they should do?
  - The next, etc.
- Does your description of the task help students to avoid wasting their time on unnecessary steps, unproductive time expenditure?
- Does your description help students to focus their time efficiently on producing the highest quality work possible in the time given?
- Would students benefit from some practice exercises (in the form of a pre-task) in class to prepare them to perform the task outside of class on the graded assignment?

CRITERIA:

- Can students use the criteria while they are working on the assignment to determine whether they are completing the assignment efficiently and effectively?
- Do the criteria take the form of a checklist students can use to evaluate the quality of their efforts while they are working on the assignment?
- Does the checklist specify characteristics of high quality work for this assignment?
- Can you help students apply the checklist to evaluating some sample work in class, so they understand how each criterion would look in practice?
- With your guidance, can the students collaboratively annotate several examples of work to indicate where/how the work satisfies the criteria? (These annotated examples may then be shared as a reference for students to use while they work on their own assignments.)
- Would a rubric (AAC&U VALUE examples) be helpful to students for this assignment?
- Does the rubric provide an amount of information that helps students at this phase in their learning?
- Does the rubric provide an overwhelming or counterproductive amount of information for students at this phase in their learning?
- Did you provide examples of good work, annotated to identify exactly where and how this work satisfies your criteria?
- Can you provide students with examples in class so they and you can test out your criteria checklist or rubric to be sure students know how to apply the criteria to multiple examples of work, and eventually their own work?