

Tips for Success

The Online Instructor's (Short) Guide to Making Assignment Descriptions More Transparent

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An important aspect of teaching, no matter the target audience or delivery method (though this is particularly important in asynchronous online education because instructors do not have the opportunity to answer questions synchronously about assignments), is communicating requirements, expectations, and grading criteria for assignments. Although this may seem rudimentary for most instructors, there are many who do not provide sufficient information about assignment requirements. As a result, many students struggle with how best to complete assignments.

One effort to address the need to better communicate expectations to students is the Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education project, which is also known as the TILT Higher Ed project. TILT in Higher Ed is a “national educational development and research project that helps faculty to implement a transparent teaching framework that promotes college students' success” (Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, n.d., para. 1). The project started in 2009 at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign but is now hosted by the University of

Nevada, Las Vegas (see <https://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning>). In 2014, the project partnered with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as part of the association's Liberal Education and America's Promise Transparency and Problem-Centered Learning efforts. In addition to offering workshops, research findings, and surveys, TILT in Higher Ed has resources (see <https://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency/tilt-higher-ed-examples-and-resources>) for instructors interested in applying “transparent methods” of teaching, one of which is providing transparent assignment descriptions.

WHAT IS A TRANSPARENT ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION?

A transparent assignment description consists of a clearly described purpose, task, and criteria for the assignment, as well as information about the skills students will learn/develop by completing the assignment and ways in which the content and skills learned can be applied in and beyond the course learning. Though these are all of the components, a key feature is describing how the assignment relates to

students, beyond the classroom (Winkelmes, Bowles-Terry, Gianoutsos, & Humphreys, 2014). In an online course, this could be a textual description, a screencast, or even a video by the instructor.

Building on this framework, below is a checklist that online instructors can use to better communicate the purpose, task, and criteria for their assignments. Note that the “Requirements” are what TILT in Higher Ed would describe as the Task.

ONLINE ASSIGNMENTS CHECKLIST

- **Due date:** Indicating when an assignment is due is important.
- **Purpose:** This section explains what the purpose of the assignment is, how it addresses the goals and/or objectives for the course (what content and skills will students develop) and how it relates to the learning needs of the target audience. Also, if applicable, include the standards the assignment addresses.
- **Requirements:** Here, instructors should provide explicit information about the components of the assignment, including for example, the
 - major components or parts of the assignment;
 - specific expectations for the assignment (e.g., how many pages, what format it is to be turned in, file naming conventions, etc.).
- **Submission:** Students should not have to guess “where” or how to submit their assignments. Most learning management systems have several different ways that students can submit assignments. In some cases, students can submit their assignments directly to the grade center in the learning manage-

ment systems; however, the instructor may not want it submitted this way for a variety of reasons. Whatever the case, it is important to be clear about where and how to submit assignments.

- **Grading criteria:** Students should be informed as to how they will be assessed. Instructors can share the grading criteria. For example, the assignment can be graded on a pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis for addressing all of the assignment’s requirements. Alternatively, if a rubric or peer assessment is the criteria, then the rubric and/or peer assessment criteria should be included.

Other items that can be included are examples of assignments, answers to frequently asked questions about the assignment, specific readings that address content required in the assignment, as well as any other resources that might help the student better comprehend what s/he is to do for the assignment. Finally, inclusion of such information should not only make assignment descriptions more transparent, but also curtail the number of e-mails/questions instructors receive about their assignments.

REFERENCES

- Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning>
- Winkelmes, M., Bowles-Terry, M., Gianoutsos, D., Humphreys, K. (2014). *Transparent assignments enhance students’ success*. Retrieved from https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/OLC-Handout-June-10-2016_winkelmes.pdf