

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

## Breaking News

The [Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project](#) at UNLV 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). **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 faculty do not make these things clear for students). For UNLV students, **benefits also included a significantly higher rate of returning to college the following year** (Winkelmes et al., *Peer Review* 2016; Gianoutsos and Winkelmes, *PADE Proceedings* 2016).

## Background

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 2011). In addition, 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 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.)

Aronson, J., Fried, C., & Good, C. "Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2002): 113-125.

Gianoutsos, Daniel and Mary-Ann Winkelmes. "Navigating with Transparency." *Proceedings of the Pennsylvania Association of Developmental Educators* (Spring, 2016).

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L.. "A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes among minority students." *Science* 331 (2011): 1447-51.

Winkelmes, Mary-Ann, Matthew Bernacki, Jeffrey Butler, Michelle Zochowski, Jennifer Golanics, Kati Harriss Weavil. "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* 18, 1/2 (Winter/Spring 2016).

## Transparent Assignment Template

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*This template can be used as a guide for developing, explaining, and discussing class activities and out-of-class assignments. Making these aspects of each course activity or assignment explicitly clear to students has demonstrably enhanced students' learning in a national study.<sup>1</sup>*

### Assignment Name

Due date:

**Purpose:** Define the learning objectives, in language and terms that help students recognize how this assignment will benefit their learning. Indicate how these are connected with institutional learning outcomes, and how the specific knowledge and skills involved in this assignment will be important in students' lives beyond the contexts of this assignment, this course, and this college.

**Skills:** The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in professional life beyond school:

*Terms from Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives may help you explain these skills in language students will understand. Listed from cognitively simple to most complex, these skills are:*

- understanding basic disciplinary knowledge and methods/tools
- applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- creating/inventing a new interpretation, product, theory

**Knowledge:** This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- 1.
- 2.

**Task:** Define what activities the student should do/perform. "Question cues" from this chart might be helpful: <http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf>. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students' efforts. Specify any extraneous mistakes to be avoided.

### Criteria for Success:

*Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple, annotated examples of what these characteristics look like in practice, to encourage students' creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. With students, collaboratively analyze examples of work before the students begin working. Explain how excellent work differs from adequate work. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful work. This enables students to evaluate the quality of their own efforts while they are working, and to judge the success of their completed work. Students can also use the checklist to provide feedback on peers' coursework. Indicate whether this task/product will be graded and/or how it factors into the student's overall grade for the course. Later, asking students to reflect and comment on their completed, graded work allows them to focus on changes to their learning strategies that might improve their future work.*

The author developed an earlier version of this template at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

<sup>1</sup> Winkelmes, Mary-Ann. "Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students' Learning." *Liberal Education* 99,2 (Spring 2013); Winkelmes et al, "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* 18,1/2 (Winter/Spring 2016).







## 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](mailto:mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu)

### PURPOSE:

#### Skills

- Does your purpose statement specify content knowledge that students will gain from doing this assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular knowledge 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 knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course? beyond the major? beyond college?

#### Knowledge

- Does your purpose statement specify a skill or skill set that students will practice while doing the assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular skill/skill set to examples/contexts where this skill was important in the context of:
  - 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?