ASSIGNMENT ARCHITECTURE
Clear, Accessible, & Equitable Assignment Design for Research and Writing

DESIGNING CLEAR, ACCESSIBLE, AND EQUITABLE ASSIGNMENTS IS A QUESTION OF ETHICS.

We know, we started out with a bold and perhaps controversial statement, but for us, assignment design isn't just about getting your students to "stop using internet sources" or "write clear thesis statements." It's about meeting students—particularly students with learning disabilities and/or English Language Learners (ELLs)—where they are and helping them succeed.

HOW TO GET STARTED:

We really like the simplicity of the Harvard Writing Project's advice on designing essay assignments ("Designing Essay Assignments," Gordon Harvey):

1. NAME WHAT YOU WANT AND IMAGINE STUDENTS DOING IT.

We interpret this as asking you to define the key terms you use (even "research" and "thesis" should be defined!). Take your time really thinking through what you need to tell your students to see the results you want: Is this a creative assignment or an academic one? What is the audience you're imagining for this writing? What kind of argument do you want to see?

2. TAKE TIME IN CLASS TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO SUCCEED AT THE PAPER.

Yes, this! Don't just hand out an assignment and be done with it. Go over it in class. Over. And. Over.

3. BUILD IN PROCESS.

Are you asking for peer-reviewed sources? Why not build in a peer review or peer editing session? Ask for drafts in advance. Assign an annotated bibliography. What's the point of giving feedback if students don't have a chance to learn and revise based on that feedback?
DEFINING AN ARGUMENT

Does your assignment ask that students make and defend a position on a specific topic?

Do you want students to offer solutions to a problem?

Do you want a compare/contrast paper with both sides shown but one proven to be stronger than the other?

Should students acknowledge the other side of the argument or stick to one side?

Do you want students to show the cause/effect of an issue or situation?

Do you want students to propose a new event or action?

Should the argument be based on personal experience or research and sources?

Do you want students to discuss/include pathos, logos, and ethos for this argument?
WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Does your assignment assume a general adult audience, a resistant audience, or an expert audience?

Audience type establishes the type of vocabulary and the tone students should use.

Is the audience professional, everyday citizens, peer, teacher, college community, general public, U.S., international, familiar with the topic or newbies?

Audience will determine how much summary and explanation are needed for a particular topic.

Audience also determines the type and number of research sources.
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT FROM CITATIONS?

Do you want a balance of quoted, paraphrased, and summarized material? Be sure to provide specific details, including the use of signal phrases.

Will you accept only one citation style? If yes, make your preference clear. Choosing the citation style for each paper keeps the paper format consistent for students and for you.
CRITICAL THINKING & READING

GENERAL SUMMARY OF READING

HOW MUCH DO YOU WANT STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH THE READING/SOURCES?

Do you want them to...

Discover and evaluate sources, especially in the Annotated Bibliography?

Read source content with an open mind, not preconceived ideas?

Determine facts from interpretation?

Go beyond summary when writing about sources; sometimes starting with their personal connection/reaction to the reading helps students connect with the material?

See how sources interact with each other to support or contrast the thesis?

EVALUATING SOURCES FOR RELEVANCE

SYNTHESIZING THE SOURCES TO SUPPORT ARGUMENT
WHAT ROLE DOES ORIGINALITY CARRY IN YOUR ASSIGNMENT?

Do you simply want to see that students are injecting novel aspects into an assignment, or do you want students to approach the topic in a completely original way? (Examples from you will be instructive.)

Consider if you want to move from summary to reflection to individual analysis/interpretation with different assignments to ease students into producing original work.

Consider that even an "open" topic, in order to show originality, may still require some parameters to help students feel comfortable. You can keep the topic open but ask for their strongest reaction, best use of an item, reasons why something won't work, etc. to give students a framework in which they can be original.
FORM

WHAT TYPE OF WRITING ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Do you expect a thesis statement, or do you simply want a reading response? Make sure you define what this looks like for you. Thesis statements can vary widely depending upon genre, so make sure you’re clear about your own expectations.

creative

reading response

opinion

journalistic

academic
ARE YOU A STRICT GRAMMARIAN AND EXPECT TO SEE PROPER GRAMMAR AND MECHANICS?

Are you an Oxford comma fan or foe? Do you want to see the various uses of semicolons? Do you expect American spelling/usage of words and punctuation?

DO YOU PLAN TO OFFER REFRESHERS ON VARIOUS GRAMMATICAL AND MECHANICAL ELEMENTS? IF YES, SUCH REFRESHERS COULD BE PART OF SCAFFOLDED ASSIGNMENTS.

Consider the Writing Studio resources or include a reference book or online resource to help students with punctuation, sentence structure, and grammar.

DO YOU WANT A SPECIFIC FONT STYLE AND SIZE? SPECIFIC MARGINS? PAGE NUMBERS? HEADINGS? DOUBLE OR SINGLE LINE SPACING?

This is a good way to remind students that paragraphs need to be indented; the paper needs a font that is readable and lends tone to the content. For example, Times New Roman has a more professional, academic look to it than Comic Sans does; however, Comic Sans might work well if the assignment is humorous or entertaining.
THE LENGTH OF THE ASSIGNMENT CAN HELP YOU DECIDE IF SCAFFOLDING WILL BE HELPFUL.

A 2-3 page paper is not going to contain the same detailed argument or citations of a 5-10 page paper.

A 5-10 page paper is going to require more involvement on your part, and the students’, so you may want to build up to that length with a few shorter papers early in the semester.
WHAT DO YOU EXPECT IN TERMS OF ORGANIZATION?

Do you require a written thesis or can it be implied in the paper?

Should the thesis be the last sentence in the first paragraph?

Should certain examples/support be placed in certain paragraphs?

Do you require a brief summary of the reading before the analysis or research?

THESIS AND SUPPORT IN CERTAIN PARAGRAPHS

SPECIFIC OUTLINE TO BE FOLLOWED
WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF YOUR ASSIGNMENT?
To ascertain if students have correctly understood a concept?
To expand their knowledge of a topic?
To argue persuasively in support of or against something?

UTILIZE BLOOM’S TAXONOMY TO DELINEATE AN INTRODUCTORY ASSIGNMENT FROM AN ADVANCED ASSIGNMENT.
Understand: Students summarize a topic, using basic sources and describing it in their own words.
Apply: Students use previously learned information to solve a problem or complete a task.
Analyze: Students interpret an idea, draw connections, and consider the available evidence to reach a conclusion.
Evaluate: Students make judgements about an idea or concept.
Create: Students produce original work that connects different elements together, including arguing for a specific position.
SPECIFIED SOURCES
What kind of sources do you want students to use or not use—be specific and explain.

INTERNET SOURCES
Are you prohibiting the use of "Internet sources?" That wording often confuses students who think that the prohibited internet sources includes using the library catalog or one of the articles they find within it. It might help to specify where it's okay to find information to use.

There are legitimate sources found online in government, association, and other expert websites. Sometimes they use less academic language which can be useful to many MICA students.

Google Scholar is a tool we suggest to find sources that Decker Library doesn't subscribe to. There are sometimes links to PDFs that are stored outside of paywalled databases.

Decker Library's catalog is a great place to find online, academic resources—however there is content from newspapers and popular magazines included. Let your students know if these are okay to use.

PEER-REVIEWED SOURCES
If you're asking students to include peer-reviewed sources in their bibliography, make sure you define "peer review" for them.

Not all sources in library databases are from peer-reviewed journals, so your students will need to know what they're looking for. Further, there may be book reviews in peer-reviewed journals, and your students should understand that a book review does not count as a peer-reviewed source.

Many peer-reviewed resources are difficult to read for someone who isn't a subject expert. If your student hasn't done a lot of work on that subject, a reader or introductory text may be better suited to the assignment.

WIKIPEDIA
Students usually know they shouldn't use Wikipedia for their coursework, but secretly use it anyway. We advise getting this secret out into the open.

Wikipedia is great for background research and for finding sources linked as references. We recommend it for that use.

It's not something that should be cited. Not because it's online or because it's open-source—it's because no encyclopedia should be cited in academic work (such as Encyclopædia Britannica).

Speaking of Encyclopædia Britannica—did you know that a study in Nature found that Wikipedia is nearly as reliable as EB?
IS YOUR ASSIGNMENT DESIGNED TO BUILD ON PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE OR SKILLS?

If yes, how many separate-but-linked assignments have you planned? How will you evaluate successful scaffolding?

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

When assigning an annotated bibliography, make sure you define what exactly you mean by an annotated bibliography. There are many types of annotated bibliographies out there, and you’ll need to tell your students exactly what you expect.

Summary annotations briefly summarize the text but do not attempt to evaluate it for its quality or relevancy to an assignment.

Evaluative (or critical) annotations analyze the work for any biases, lack of evidence, or whether or not this work would be useful to a particular audience or assignment. They do not summarize the content of the work.

Combination annotated bibliographies are the most commonly used, spending a few sentences each on summarizing and evaluating the text. It’s helpful to students to include an example of the type of annotation you would like to see.

It may seem obvious, but you should also let your students know which citation style you want to see.

DRAFT

If assigning a draft, make sure you define what you expect from a draft.

What do you care most about from the students' work? Is it the grammar or the argument you'll be offering feedback on?

Assigning drafts helps students experience writing like they would after they graduate. Rarely does one create published writing without revision.

PEER REVIEW:

If requiring a peer review, provide students with a rubric or set of guidelines.

Assigning peer review introduces students to the process that they've heard about before, preparing them for more professional writing. (How many times have you submitted professional writing that was not edited or reviewed by someone else?)

This technique can be used for any kind of writing, not just academic writing.
WHAT SOURCES ARE YOU REQUIRING?

If you are assigning the topics—have you checked that the library has sources available?

Make sure the resources are appropriate for the students’ skill level.

Are the library’s resources current? Please suggest books in advance for the library to purchase.

Emerging issues and topics will usually not have print sources. The most current information is electronic only. Keep that in mind when assigning research parameters.

Unless the students are working from their assigned readings, students should work on separate topics to ensure that there are enough sources available for everyone in the library.

When students are doing secondary source research, there may not be enough material to support someone doing a topic who is new to research. Generally new researchers are looking very narrowly at a topic and get frustrated when they can’t find research that discusses their exact topic in detail. Discuss what your students should do if they do not find the perfect source (broaden topics, change topics, etc.).

Primary source research is complex but rewarding! Ensure that your students have enough subject knowledge and the appropriate skills to utilize these sources. Scaffolding your assignments will help your students work with primary sources.
STUDENTS FORGET THAT THERE ARE MICA PEOPLE WHO CAN HELP THEM. EXPLICITLY MENTION WHAT SUPPORT STUDENTS CAN SEEK FOR THEIR ASSIGNMENT.

Librarians staff the Research Help desk between 12-6pm everyday.

Each Department/Program has their own dedicated librarian.

Connect with us beforehand to go over your assignment.

For small classes: Assign extra credit or require students to talk to a librarian or tutor. **Run this by the librarian or Writing Studio first (we may be busy/out of town)!

SUPPORT
check all that apply

YOU

LIBRARIANS

WRITING STUDIO

TUTORS
THE TIME TO COMPLETE THE ASSIGNMENT WILL HELP YOU DECIDE IF SCAFFOLDING ASSIGNMENTS COULD BE BENEFICIAL.

Provide students with an assignment timeline.

Factor in extra time if this is your first assignment, especially for a freshman class, or if you have many ELL students.

Consider factoring time into class for a visit from the Writing Studio to provide a citation, research writing, or plagiarism workshop.
VOICE DETERMINES RHETORICAL ELEMENTS, SUCH AS TONE, VOCABULARY, AND PRONOUNS.

Identify which “person” you do or do not want: yes to first-person, but no to second-person; strictly third-person; only second-person.

Review vocabulary that fits the paper’s voice: slang and casual words may be acceptable for a reading response but not for a research paper.
THE END

Thanks for making it to the end of this pamphlet!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

You’ll find a bibliography of resources we recommend here: https://libguides.mica.edu/assignmentdesign

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