What is an assignment prompt?

Your assignment prompt is a clear statement of what you expect a student to do to demonstrate learning. Prompts are used for assessments that require a created response, such as writing assignments, oral and visual presentations, digital essays and stories, and individual or group projects. They give students clear information about: task, audience, process, format, and assessment criteria.

Why are assignment prompts important?

An effective prompt can:

Increase chances for success in completing the assignment by defining expectations and processes.

Create a common basis for response so that assignments can be scored using the same rubric.

Stimulate student responses that can give you information on what students are learning.

Model the clarity and conciseness you expect

Ensure that students are being assessed on the content they learned, rather than reading skills they developed prior participating in your course.

Make sure that the assignments you give your students create opportunities for them to produce their best work. As one professor said, "students can do no better than the assignments they are given."

How do I prepare an assignment prompt?

To prepare an assignment prompt, review the learning outcomes for your course. What you ask students to do should provide evidence that demonstrates how well they have learned the targeted learning outcomes.

The following steps support the writing of the prompt:

1. **Think about the course learning outcomes.**
   Ask yourself what outcome[s] you want to assess in this assignment. For what outcome do you want evidence of what students are learning or have learned?

2. **Articulate the task description clearly and concisely.**
   Students are more likely to stray off topic when faced with large, broadly defined writing prompts. By providing details about what you expect, you can press students to make choices that promote clarity and conciseness.

3. **Communicate clear performance criteria.**
   Determine the criteria you will look for in assessing an excellent student product, such as its clarity, originality, logic, organization, or sources. Be sure to communicate these criteria to students in the prompt.

4. **Specify the intended audience.**
   Students make assumptions about the audience they are addressing. Students may assume, for example, that because you, the instructor, are the primary audience, they do not need to define discipline-specific terms or concepts. These assumptions may not match your expectations. It's important on assignments to specify the intended audience (e.g., undergraduates with no biology background, a potential funder who does not know engineering).

5. **Specify the purpose of the assignment.**
   If students are unclear about the goals or purpose of the assignment, they may make unnecessary mistakes. For example, if students believe an assignment is focused on summarizing research as opposed to evaluating it, they may seriously miscalculate the task and put their energies in the wrong place. It is important to make your objectives for the assignment clear to students.

6. **Forward the formatting parameters.**
   Tell them what you want rather than be surprised at what you get. If you have specific parameters in mind for the assignment (e.g., length, size, formatting, citation conventions) you should be sure to specify them in your assignment description.

What's a good process for reviewing the assignment?
Researchers recommend the following questions to guide instructors in the development of student assignments:

Ask yourself, have I . . .
1. Provided a written description of the assignment (in the syllabus or in a separate document)?
2. Specified the purpose of the assignment?
3. Indicated the intended audience?
4. Articulated the instructions in precise and unambiguous language?
5. Provided information about the appropriate format and presentation (e.g., page length, typed, cover sheet, bibliography)?
6. Indicated special instructions, such as a particular citation style or headings?
7. Specified the due date and the consequences for missing it?
8. Articulated performance criteria clearly?
9. Indicated the assignment's point value or percentage of the course grade?
10. Provided students (where appropriate) with models or samples?

Where can I look for more?

To learn more about creating prompts for written assignments, see

Calfee, Robert C., and Miller, Roxanne Greitz. (2007). "Best Practices in Writing Assessment." In *Best Practices in Writing Instruction.* Eds. Steve Graham, Charles A. MacArthur, and Jill Fitzgerald, 265-286. New York, NY: Guilford.

To learn more about the concepts of audience and purpose and the value of authenticity in writing prompts, the National Writing Project offers practical ideas and examples of effective prompts

National Writing Project. *Wise Eyes: Prompting for Meaningful Student Writing.* 2011. https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/15440/Wise_Eyes.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d

Carnegie Mellon University offers general suggestions and questions to consider when creating assignments. It includes other resources in print and on the web that provide examples of interesting, discipline-specific assignment ideas.

http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html