

What Makes an Assignment Effective?

There is no formula for what makes an assignment effective. They vary in all kinds of ways depending on the course context, student preparation, and the outcomes the assignment is designed to foster and elicit. For instance, a writing assignment for first-year students' needs more explicit directions and scaffolding than one at the senior level. That said, effective assignments are often characterized by at least some of the following features. You will think of others as well.

1. **Intentional:** An effective assignment has a clear sense of purpose. It is aligned with course, program and institutional goals for student learning.
2. **Clear to students:** Assignments and their purposes should be clear to students, who will benefit from understanding why they are being asked to undertake the task at hand and how that task (assignment) fits into a larger trajectory of their learning.
3. **Explicit about evaluation:** Additionally students should understand how their work will be evaluated. This might mean providing students with an evaluative rubric as part of the assignment, but other forms and formats for communicating expectations can be effective as well, including a statement of criteria for evaluation or examples of effective performance.
4. **Engaging:** Effective assignments present what composition scholar John Bean (2011) calls a "Task as Intriguing Problem" (TIP). That is, they engage and motivate students.
5. **Responsive to different ways of knowing and different assets that students bring to their work:** This might be accomplished by offering options in terms of format (student might write a paper, develop a website, or create and present a poster) or by drawing on student experiences in ways that reflect equity mindedness and cultural awareness.
6. **Formative:** Effective assignments are designed and used in ways that provide students with useful feedback for improvement. This might mean working through multiple drafts, with feedback along the way. It might mean opportunities to self-assess and reflect on the process, with students asking "How might I have done better on this assignment?" Or, "How can I build on what I've done here?"
7. **Linked to and aligned with other assignments:** An effective assignment is not an island. It is connected to other assignments the student encounters in the same course but also to assignments in courses that precede and follow. When assignments are linked to one another in ways that are made explicit to students, they create more coherent, connected pathways for learning.
8. **What would you add to this list?**