

# Designing Better Assignments

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# Workshop Preview

1. Assignment design principles and strategies
2. Applying a principle or strategy to improve or create an assignment.
3. Rubric design and use.
4. Helping students with assignments.
5. Joining an assignment design community: *Assignments Across Disciplines*

# What you want from today

*In the shared word document please write one thing you'd like to learn about assignments today...*

# Assignments are building blocks of learning



# Assignments as Teaching & Learning Tools

“Students fail assignments and sometimes assignments fail students.”  
(p. 95)

“if student work is the engine of a course, then the assignments are the creative centre of our teaching practice” (p. 110)

William Germano & Kit Nicholls, *Syllabus: The remarkable, unremarkable document that changes everything*

# Assignments and Backward Design

## Conventional

- Instructor-focused
- Content-focused
- Focused exclusively on evaluation and summative feedback

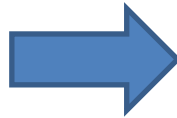
## Backward

- Student-focused
- Driven by learning objectives that include skills as well as knowledge
- Includes formative feedback

# Backwards Design Focuses on Students

## TEACHING GOALS:

What you want to teach



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

The *knowledge, skills, and/or values* **students will get** from an activity, assignment, class, course, program, and/or degree

# Reframing Assignments around Objectives or Outcomes

Types of outcomes:

- Cognitive
- Affective
- Kinesthetic

Assessment asks:

“To what degree did the student meet the outcomes?”



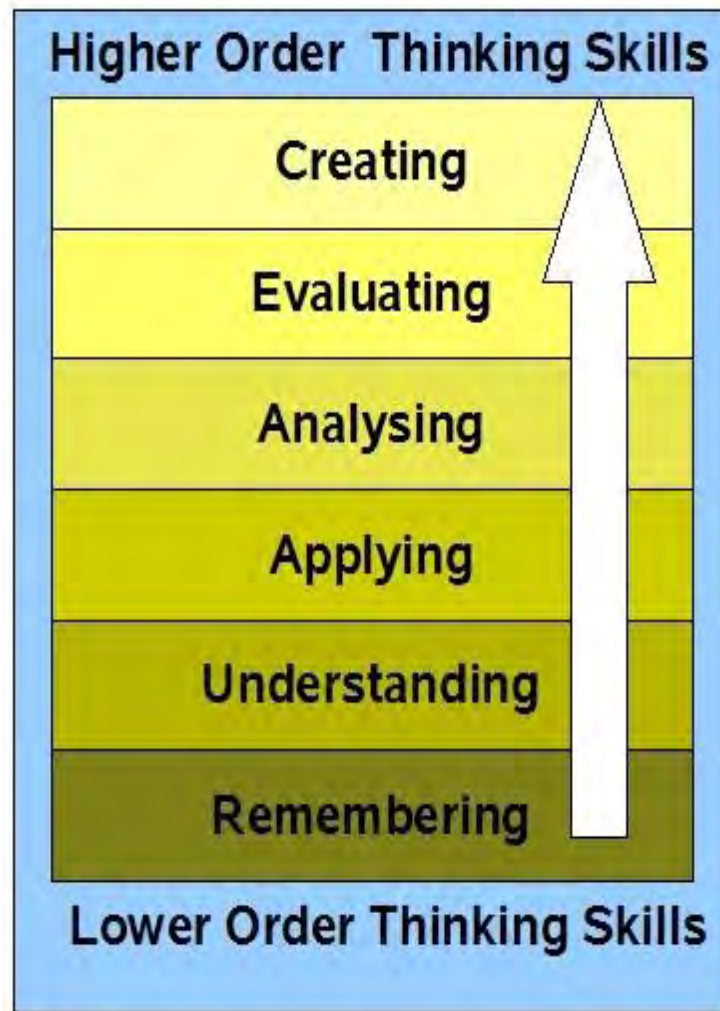
# Good Learning Objectives

1. Focus on students applying and integrating both knowledge and skills.
2. Use specific, active, and concrete language.
3. Make evaluation criteria explicit through rubrics or scoring guides.
4. Help both teachers and students focus their effort and time.

# From Teaching Goals to Learning Outcomes

Vague teaching goal:	Specific learning objective:
<p><i>"By the end of this course, students will <b>understand</b> the research process."</i></p>	<p>"By the end of this course, students will be able to:</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Describe</b> the research process in social interventions</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Evaluate critically</b> the quality of research by others</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formulate <b>research questions</b> designed to test, refine, and build theories</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Identify</b> and <b>demonstrate</b> facility in research design and data collection and analysis strategies</li> </ul>





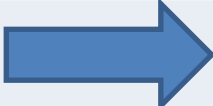

# Progressive Cognitive Learning Outcomes



Images of Bloom's taxonomy taken from Educational Origami, <http://edorigami.wikispaces.com/Bloom%27s+Digital+Taxonomy>

Bloom, Benjamin S. (1974). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: Classification of educational goals*. New York: D. McKay.

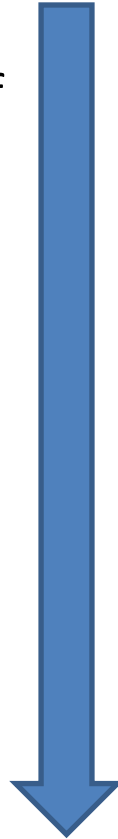
# How well does the assignment fit the learning outcome?

Learning Outcome		Assignment
Apply economic concepts and models to a real-world problem		Write a policy memo
Critique different ways to study history		Write a historiography
Learn scientific methods and processes		Write a lab report
Apply evolutionary theory to an organism.	 	Write a research proposal that identifies a trait that is the result of evolutionary adaptation for a given organism.

# Disciplinary learning outcomes

## Sociology

1. **Summarize** Durkheim's theory of society
2. **Apply** Durkheim's theory to the nation's drug problem
3. Based on current data, what **predictions** can you make about the drug problem in the near future?
4. Write an analysis and **critique** of the current drug problem, in the context of Durkheim's theory and explain whether or not the problem can be solved.



## Integrative Physiology

1. **Define** viscoelasticity
2. **Construct a model** that demonstrates the properties of viscoelasticity
3. What **predictions** could you make if the patellar tendon were replaced with a non-yielding Kevlar band? Elastic band?
4. **Compare** and **contrast** several materials that could be used to replace a torn ACL. Show that one would be best **and explain why**.

# Confusing Assignments form part of the “The Hidden Curriculum”



Photo by Jeshoots from Unsplash

# From Hidden Curriculum to Transparent Design

“Transparency means letting students in on what they’re being asked to do and why they’re being asked to do it—in other words, what they can expect to learn from doing it.”

James Rhem, The National Teaching and Learning Forum

(Preface ix)

*Transparent Design in Higher Education, Teaching, and Leadership*

## *Transparent Assignments* require instructors to

1. **Articulate** learning outcomes and share these with students (and TAs if applicable).
2. **Align** assignments with significant course learning outcomes.
3. **Scaffold** major assignments.
4. Build in **formative feedback** and opportunities for revision.
5. Make **evaluation criteria explicit (e.g., rubrics)** with students and TAs.



# Exercise 1: In your group, analyze and improve one of the assignments

## 1 Humanities or Social Sciences Example

*Mateo is a first-year student with little experience researching and writing essays. He has just received the following assignment.*

Prepare an annotated bibliography on the implications of a milestone event from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The items you choose for your annotated bibliography will be used for your next assignment, the research paper. Your bibliography should include 5 recent items including two scholarly journal articles not from the course reading list. **Websites are not acceptable and be sure to follow correct citation practices.**

## 2. Science Example

*Sangeet is one of over a thousand students in a second-year life sciences class held in Convocation Hall. She has no research experience and her TA has just given her the following assignment.*

Choose a topic of interest in the life sciences. Using an online database, find citation information, including the abstract, for five recent peer reviewed articles on your topic. Choose one and analyze the first page and the bibliography. Write a paragraph explaining its relevance to your topic. Your paper must be error free and be sure not to plagiarize.

# Exercise 1: Improve an assignment

*Brainstorm in your breakout group choose one or more way to improve the assignment:*

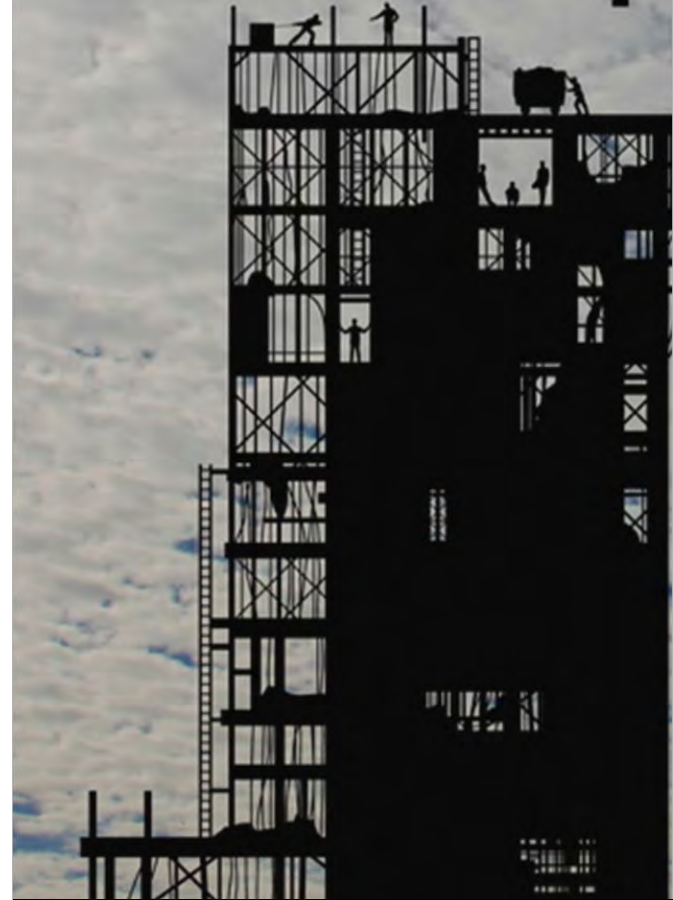
1. Identify the hidden skills or knowledge explicit by creating learning outcomes or objectives.
2. Devise an activity that gives students practice with required skills.
3. Clarify the instructions.
4. Direct students to university resources (e.g., library or writing centre) where they can get help.

# 5-minute BREAK

# Why scaffold?

- Break up learning outcomes into manageable steps
- Give students the support they need to develop their skills and build their knowledge.

**What you want  
them to learn**



**What students know  
and can do now**

# Examples of Scaffolded Assignments

## Humanities/Social Sciences paper:

1. Paper Proposal 5%
2. Annotated Bibliography 5%
3. Draft Paper 10%
4. Revised Paper 20%

Feedback at  
each stage

## Sciences: A lab report

1. Write each of the following sections separately and get feedback on them: hypothesis, methods, results, discussion).
2. Revise and combine into a complete lab report.

# Build in formative feedback

## Summative Assessment

- Backward-looking
- Assesses mastery to date
- Evaluative/graded

## Formative Feedback

- Forward-looking
- Constructive: focused on how student can improve
- Needn't include a grade: e.g., "red light/green light" for a research question or hypothesis

*“A ‘C’ paper is an ‘A’ paper turned in too soon.”*  
*John C. Bean*

# Feedback:

## Mind your workload through

- Guided peer review
- Encouraging students to consult a learning strategist or to take work-in-progress to a Writing Centre.

# Suggestions for Creating or revising an assignment

1. Remember that small changes lead to big improvements.
2. Ask your peers (both from your discipline and outside your field) for feedback.
3. Get feedback from students on assignments .



# Exercise 2

## Improve one of your assignments

1. Choose one (or more) things to change such as
  - Draft a couple of learning outcomes (chat [links](#) to CTSI resource)
  - scaffold a major assignment and/or identify places for formative feedback
  - clarify instructions about tasks
  - direct students to resources
  - show annotated examples of past student work
2. Make or explain your change in writing so you have a record after the workshop. (7 mins. solo then share if you wish in chat)

# Instructional Rubrics

- Help instructors clarify expectations, e.g., what an A, B, C etc. look like.
- Provide transparency and clear direction to students

# Good Rubrics

1. Are communicated to students **early**.
2. Remind instructors (and TAs) **what to teach**.
3. **Save time** and enable more detailed and timely tailored feedback to students.
4. Increase **consistency** and fairness.
5. Are **tailored specifically** to the assignment.
6. Are **descriptive** and evaluative.
7. Are developed collaboratively **with TAs**.

## Exercise 3

*Skim one or two of the sample rubrics, then consider one of your assignments and*

1. Make one or two of your learning objectives into part of a rubric. (3 mins)
2. Share your draft rubric (5 mins)

See handouts 7.1-7.6

# The Student Perspective

## Students need:

- **The purpose, goal and context** of the assignment
- **Tangible** expectations and examples or exemplars
- **Transparency** in criteria
- Relevant **pre-requisite skills** and thinking
- Deadlines and **structure**
- **Help**, Q/A, Resources
- Assignment visual **readability**: font, format and layout on the page, sections, task-ability

# The Student Perspective

## Students struggle with:

- Getting **started** and **breaking things down**
- Awareness of support and research **services**
- Underestimating the value of **process** (e.g. pre-writing)
- **Time management** with competing deadlines
- Sparse or lengthy **assignment descriptions**
- Weak pre-requisite **skills**
- Lack of understanding or experience with the **ideal product** (so exemplars are helpful)

# The Student Perspective

## Students benefit from:

- Scaffolded assignments
- Learning to **project manage** (backwards plan) their work
- **Visual** as well as text representations of the assignment  
Challenging, **specific research questions** and thinking prompts
- Writing assignments of **different lengths**
- **Specificity** – but not overwhelming detail – in the assignment and rubric
- Detailed **feedback** – especially feedback that can be applied (formative)

# Resources for Students

- **Libraries – research skills and resources**

<https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/research>

- Workshops
- Consultations

- **English Language Learning (ELL) – academic English**

<http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ell>

- Speaking, reading, writing programs
- Peer mentor program

- **Academic Success Centre – learning skills**

<https://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/asc>

- Individual appointments, study hubs, Grad Writing Groups, Grad Productivity Groups
- Workshops, programs, events

- **Writing Centres - writing skills**

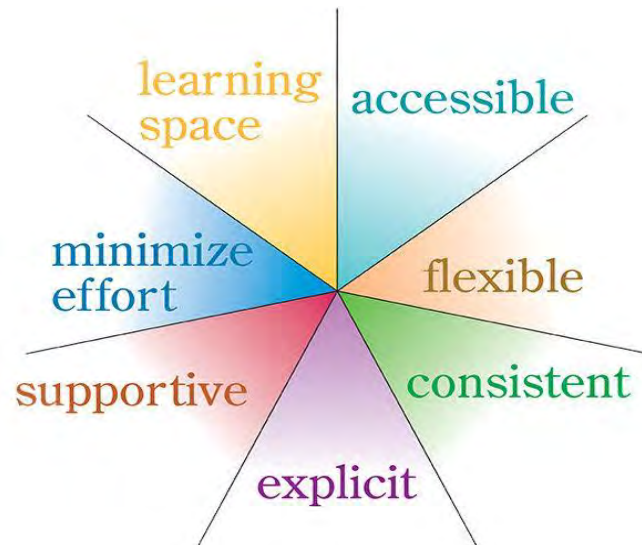
<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/>

- Individual appointments at Colleges, Faculties and SGS (GCAC)
- Writing Plus workshops, resources



# Universal Instructional Design (IUD)

**7 principles** to help design accessible teaching and learning activities, environments and materials, and create learning experiences that respect and value diversity.



At the core of UID is the concept of inclusiveness and equity.

# Universal Instructional Design



## 7 Principles

Instructional matters and activities should:

1. Be **accessible** and fair
2. Be straightforward and **consistent**
3. Provide **flexibility** in use, participation and presentation
4. Be **explicitly** presented and readily perceived
5. Provide a **supportive** learning environment
6. **Minimize unnecessary** physical effort of requirements
7. Ensure a **learning space** the accommodates both students and instructional methods



<https://madaniinteriors.com/universal-design/>

# Universal Instructional Design - Resources

University of Toronto

CTSI

<https://tatp.utoronto.ca/teaching-toolkit/effective-strategies/accessible-learning/>

University of Guelph

Open Ed

<https://opened.uoguelph.ca/instructor-resources/resources/uid-implimentation-guide-v13.pdf>

Ryerson University

Learning and Teaching Office

[https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/UDL\\_handout.pdf](https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/UDL_handout.pdf)



# Assignments Across Disciplines

Building a community of  
practice around assessment

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# AAD Values

- Accessibility and inclusion through transparency (inspired by TILT framework)
- Collaboration (e.g., through the database itself, feedback and communities of practice)
- Sharing through OER (open educational resource)
- Innovation (e.g., multimodal and “alternative” assessments)
- Inviting students’ perspectives on assessment

# AAD Purpose, Process and Platform

- Create a peer-reviewed online database of assessments and related pedagogical materials, e.g., rubrics, syllabi
- Make open-access but contributors choose their preferred type of creative commons licensing (default: CC BY-SA)
- Use TSpace



# Assignments Across Disciplines Collection



Assignments Across Disciplines is on track to become one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of peer-reviewed post-secondary assignments in Canada. The aim of this project is to create a Community of Practice (CoP) focused on assignment design that will build and sustain an open-access educational online resource to support student writing across the disciplines. Collaboration, enthusiasm, and innovation have been central to the successful implementation of this project. In order to help you best navigate this online database, please consider the following points: 1. The assignments are searchable, as are several data fields. Most educators will find the following fields most useful for searches: Title, Abstract, Course Code, Keywords, Discipline, Type of Assignment and Year. 2. For each assignment there is a short description regarding the scope and content of the material, and instructor commentary. This outline describes the basic organization of the collection using broad subject descriptions (such as essay, report, and review). 3. Each assignment and its accompanying materials (grading rubric, syllabi, etc.) are available in full text (PDF) format and can be downloaded for free. Copyright to these materials belongs to their author(s) under a default CC BY-NC license, though authors may release their materials under an individually specified CC license. Even if an author has selected an open license, a best practice for using or adapting these materials is to cite the specific TSpace entry. If you have questions about Assignments Across Disciplines, please write to assignments@utoronto.ca. Visit our website: <https://sites.google.com/view/assignmentsacrossdisciplines/>.

Browse items in this collection by the following

- Date
- Author
- Title
- Subject



## Author

Diamond, Miriam	4
Oliveira de Lima, Suzi	4
Cohen, Avi J.	2
Mideo, Nicole	2
Benson-Sokmen, Susan	1
Boyes, Don	1
Mahler, Luke	1
Moore, Hollis	1
Murray, Sarah	1
Rosenthal, Jeffrey	1





# Assignments Across Disciplines Database: Assignment Submission Form

## Instructions:

Please complete this form (this will take you about 15 minutes) by first submitting your course syllabus and pedagogical materials (e.g., assignment instructions, evaluation criteria, and/or rubric, if you have one) under Question 1, below. Next, please respond to some additional short questions related to your assignment activities. Required questions are marked with an \*.

When you are finished, click "submit". Thank you! Your contribution to Assignments Across Disciplines will inspire instructors to create meaningful learning activities for their students.

Hi Erin, when you submit this form, the owner will be able to see your name and email address.

1

Please upload your documents: syllabus, assignments, rubric, etc. here.  
(Non-anonymous question ? )

↑ Upload file

File number limit: 10 Single file size limit: 10MB Allowed file types: Word, Excel, PPT, PDF, Image, Video, Audio





# How you can engage with AAD

1. Contribute your assignments and

- Receive formative feedback
- Publish your teaching materials and story.

2. Recommend your colleagues' assignments

3. Serve as a reviewer

4. Encourage your students to nominate assignments

# Wrap-Up: Your Next Step(s)

In the chat, please share something you learned or found inspiring or a change you are making to an assignment. . .

Thank you!

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Andrea Williams [al.Williams@utoronto.ca](mailto:al.Williams@utoronto.ca)

# References and Resources

AACU (American Colleges and Universities) VALUE Rubric Development Project .

<https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>

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