

Aligning Assignments and Learning Objectives

Learning objectives or course goals function in a syllabus much the same way as an abstract in a proposal or an introduction in an essay. You should try writing them first to help you focus your ideas, but as you construct your assignments, those ideas are likely to shift and become clearer, necessitating a revision of your objectives so they match the assignment structure.

The ideas presented here are based on teaching in a bricks-and-mortar classroom in a style that favors individual student work rather than group activities. We look forward to comments that expand the conversation to include a variety of other things, including ideas that are unique to online and hybrid teaching or group activities.

Initial Questions

There are some big questions to consider before selecting specific course objectives and assignments. For some courses, the fundamental purpose is to provide content that informed citizens need to know or that students will need in a more advanced class. At the other end of the spectrum are courses that impart advanced discipline-specific skills. Many courses will fall somewhere between those two extremes. If your priority is for students to leave the class knowing who was on what side in World War II, your assignments should look rather different than those for a course in which the instructor wants students to perfect the use of Chicago style as they craft an article based on archival research that's ready to submit to a journal.

You might make a decision about that fundamental premise and then go seek students for the course who want what you're offering, but you might also consider which students are available at your institution and craft a course that meets their needs. In a perfect world, instructors would create their syllabi after they knew some things about the specific students registered for the course so the learning objectives reflected those specific students' needs and the assignment structure challenged the students but also made "success" attainable. Instructors rarely get that amount of information, but you should still try and have as clear an idea of your audience as possible before design a course. Are your students majors in your discipline? How long have they been in college? Are they basically the same age and from the same place, or is there wide-ranging demographic diversity? Are there prerequisite courses that you can build on, or are you starting with a relatively blank slate?

There are also broad institutional constraints to consider. Are you obliged to use the same texts or other materials as your colleagues? Is your course a prerequisite for something else? Does your course fulfill an institutional requirement, such as being writing intensive or focused on global exchanges? Are there constraints or elements of institutional culture that circumscribe what you can reasonably expect your students to do? For example, are the students full-time students? Do they live on campus? Do they have consistent and easy access to technology or other resources? Is it imperative to keep materials costs for the course at a minimum?

Learning and Grading

An additional institutional constraint to consider is the grading policy. Setting aside actual student performance, is it possible for every student in your class to get an A, or does your institution or department require some sort of distribution? For content-focused courses, a distribution is often the outcome. However, with skills-focused courses, students generally acquire the skill or they don't. If everyone acquires the skill, how can you justify giving only a certain number of them As? If you have

grading constraints, you definitely want to set up the assignments so they produce results that are fair to the students while also conforming to the institutional policy.

For a student to learn something—whether that means being able to recall and apply content information or performing a skill like writing in a specific genre—they need to be exposed to the correct information or method, and then they need to practice. As you plan your assignment structure, ask yourself:

1. Have I modeled how to do the task properly?
2. Have I given them an opportunity to try out the task—perhaps in a group setting—and to make mistakes while the stakes are low?
3. Have I given them an opportunity to demonstrate their independent mastery of the task?

In terms of assignments, that means asking students to do the same thing at least twice after you have given them some guidance in class. For example, there might be two exams that are formatted in the same way so students have a better sense the second time around of what is important. If you want them to learn to write a primary source analysis paper, they should write at least two. (I like to assign three: one where they all analyze the same source, one where they choose from a short list of options I provide, and one where they find their own source.) My sense is that giving them comments on the first iteration that are about success in that particular type of work and then asking them to apply those comments to a new topic in the same style is more effective than asking them to revise their first paper. Your comments do need to be delivered in time for students to use them before their second attempt.

If you need your final grades to come out in a distribution, then both iterations should be weighted the same; the lower grades the first time should produce the distribution. If you don't have that constraint, consider making the first iteration worth less than the second so they can earn the more important grade once they have more experience.

In cases where it doesn't make sense to do an assignment twice—a major research paper or a big group project, for example—use scaffolding to give the students the opportunity to learn. Scaffolding means breaking a larger project up into smaller pieces. Most people already do this when they assign a research paper, asking students to submit a proposal, a rough draft, and a final paper. The process might also include a pre-writing workshop, peer review, a poster or oral presentation, or other elements. (I like to do a peer proofreading and format check separately from the rough draft to encourage students to distinguish between the major structural work of revision and the polishing work of editing.) The elements of a scaffolded assignment before the final product might be awarded letter grades, but lowering the stakes to credit/no credit gives students more opportunity to make mistakes and then fix them, learning in the process. The final version of the paper produces the distribution of grades, as students who don't engage seriously with the feedback they received produce work of lesser quality. The scaffolding also helps students manage their time.

Assumptions about Prior Knowledge

It's usually a challenge for an instructor to predict what knowledge students will bring to a course and to set the level of difficulty accordingly. If you're teaching introductory courses or have lots of non-majors, I would be especially cautious in my assumptions about what the students will know. Even exceptionally

bright students may be encountering the forms of your particular academic discipline for the first time, and some guidance would be helpful.

If the students have to do research, do they know which databases they should be looking in? If you want them to cite their sources, do they know what that means for your particular discipline? They may never have used a footnote before. Do they know what an identification, a thesis, or a review means in the context of your discipline? If you want to make them accountable for particular information or skills, you should make time to either teach them what you want them to know or show them how to find the relevant information.

Most importantly, don't take students' reading comprehension skills for granted. Reading skills are the foundation of writing skills, and if students have problems reading, their writing will be that much worse. What does a close reading of a primary source look like? Journal articles are highly structured, but they vary from discipline to discipline and students may have never read one at all before. Talk them through how to read an article. Remind them not to skip the introduction in a monograph, as that's usually the most important part. Talk to them about how to take notes on the readings and what's covered in class so that they are doing so efficiently and with a focus on the information that is most important in the context of your class. Diagnostic exercises early in the semester can be extremely helpful. For example, ask students to rewrite a section of a primary source in their own words, or have them outline a journal article. These should definitely be low stakes activities where students get credit for doing them, rather than for getting the right answer.

Assignments and Student Choice

Without needing to embrace all the tenets of universal design or learning styles, instructors can acknowledge that each of their students has different talents and different interests. Giving students some room to make choices about the assignments they complete can be a great thing for students' learning and for getting around some challenges. (It can also bring on some logistical problems, though; more on that in a moment.)

Some of that choice might come in the form of scheduling. For example, if you want students to write two primary source analysis papers over the course of the semester, they might choose from among five different topics, each with a different due date over the course of the semester. (Consider a mechanism for preventing them from waiting to the last two options, though!) This kind of choice gives students an opportunity to mesh the work for your course with their larger schedules.

Paper topics or readings might be subject to choice as well, with students selecting from a list of options. (In many cases, giving students complete freedom to come up with their own topic or reading is a problem because they don't know enough to make a good choice.) Providing options can help you balance breadth and depth in terms of intellectual coverage. For example, while studying a topic as massive as the Cold War, one group of students might read an article or monograph about Cuba, another about Angola, and a third about Germany. If everyone in the class is reading a different book, it can also help reduce materials costs, since everyone should be able to get their book at the library. You might also consider giving students the option of writing about their book or participating in an in-person discussion of the book.

The difference might be more substantive. Some students might opt to do a primary source research paper while others write historiographical essays and the remainder produce creative projects

accompanied by process papers. That kind of choice definitely allows students to play to their strengths, and it can be an excellent way to accommodate the different needs of majors and non-majors.

Choice in assignments may also help with the issue of grade distribution, as well as cutting down on the time instructors put into providing comments that students ignore. As a very rough example, you might offer four assignment choices, with two being required to pass the course with a C-range grade, three for a B-range grade, and four for an A-range grade. Enthusiastic students can do rigorous work and excel, and the instructor doesn't have to grade additional material from students who don't care. If you decide to offer optional assignments or use grade contracting, make sure you really think it through so you are being fair and so you are not discouraging students from engaging with the course.

Offering students choices can require more work on your part. You have to come up with all the choices. If groups of students are reading different books and you want your institution's bookstore to stock them, have a conversation with the people there to figure out how they want you to place the order, and find a way of making it clear to students that they don't need to buy all of the books. (I wouldn't do a "different books" assignment until at least a month into the course.) Keeping track of who is doing what can be a challenge. If it doesn't matter how many students take on a particular task, then that kind of tracking isn't as important, but if you want to build on the fact that they're doing different stuff—for example, if you want at least two students to have written about a topic so they can serve as discussion leaders on a particular day—you need a mechanism for preventing them from changing their choice without your consent.

If you are not daunted by the logistical challenges, there is much to be gained from letting students make some choices that help to individualize their experience.

Assignment Ideas

This list is definitely a work in progress, and we invite your additions, questions, and refinements. The categorization presented here is merely a suggestion; most assignments can achieve multiple pedagogical ends. Think creatively!

Comprehension and Importance

abstract (hold them to a particular word count)

narrative – based on a number of sources (such as correspondence about an issue in *Foreign Relations of the United States*), construct a chronological narrative or timeline of what happened

note checks for reading or lecture notes

summary (hold them to a particular word count)

Critique and Reflection

reaction paper

reflection paper/journal

review (keep in mind that many students won't have enough subject expertise or familiarity with the genre to write an academic book or article review; asking them to answer specific questions about the author's use of sources or other issues may be more effective)

Objective Assessments

exams and quizzes – in class or online

essays that recapitulate the information and argument presented in class

map quizzes

Participation

answering questions via personal response devices (clickers)

entry pass assignment – something they need to bring in order to get into the room for a specific class; everyone who gets in is prepared to participate in the day's activity)

free writes

Primary Source Analysis

annotation of a document

essay that presents a close reading of a single source

essay that compares and contrasts multiple sources

collection and annotation of a set of related documents

Research Projects

poster

primary and/or secondary source research paper

proposal

writing from an assumed persona (such as a journalist, a policy analyst, or an eye witness) and in a particular genre (editorial, advertisement, letter, etc.) – note that this type of project may not lend itself well to traditional citation methods, so you might ask students to produce a process paper with a bibliography in addition to their creative piece.

Secondary Literature

annotated bibliography

historiographical essay/literature review

Synthesis

essays that draw on assigned readings and lectures (no additional research)

materials for a lecture (text and visuals)

Other Ideas

attending campus or community events

contributing to Wikipedia or similar projects

debates

documentary

exhibits – physical or virtual

following current events/media coverage

guides/instructions for others (how to conduct a search in a database, etc.)

lesson plan

mapping

oral presentations

role playing

scavenger hunt

syllabus

timeline