Designing & Evaluating Writing Assignments

The following advice is intended for faculty across schools, colleges, and campuses. The Writing Center’s Director and Assistant Director are available to provide a) seminars/workshops on some or all of these practices; b) individual consultations on assignments, rubrics, or evaluative feedback; and/or c) didactic feedback on a small sampling of graded assignments. Please email Writing.Center@ucdenver.edu for more information.

Assignment Description/Prompt:
• Design a direct, precise assignment prompt that:
  o Makes clear the purpose, audience, and specific discipline/genre conventions
  o Is no more than one page single-spaced in length
  o Uses a single noun(descriptor for the assignment (e.g., policy memo, site analysis, literature review, etc.)
  o Uses no more than three verbs to describe outcomes (e.g., reflect, summarize, critique, etc.)
  o Explicitly outlines due date(s), citation style, format requirements, etc.
• Introduce, explain, and solicit questions about the prompt. For example:
  o Require students post a question in a Canvas Discussion.
  o Require students to read before class; then facilitate class discussion.
  o Have students in groups generate two questions for class discussion.

Rubrics:
• Design a rubric that clearly outlines the evaluative criteria you will use. For example:
  o Content/Ideas: Does it answer the question(s)/address the issue(s)? In what detail? Using how many examples?
  o Thesis/Argument: Does it need one? What should it look like?
  o Organization: What does logical, systematic organization look like?
  o Evidence & Analysis: Is quotation or paraphrase more appropriate? What level of analysis is necessary and what does it look like?
  o Stylistic Conventions: What are these in your discipline/genre? What citation style is expected? What exactly does “tone” mean?
  o Grammar, Syntax, & Mechanics: What are your expectations? How necessary is perfection? What weight does this hold in the grade?
• Introduce, explain, and solicit questions about the rubric and its use.
Assignment Examples:
• Consider providing students either a former-student example or published example reminiscent of the assignment (or both):
  o Annotate the example(s), pointing out strengths and weaknesses. (Example need not be perfect – students can learn just as much from a “good” example as from a “great” example.)
  o Solicit clarifying questions and provide explanation.
• Design an activity that applies the rubric to the example
  o Have students do this individually or in groups
  o Present your own completed rubric and explain your reasoning

Scaffolding
• Break up larger assignments into smaller parts. For example:
  o Proposals
  o Outlines
  o Multiple Drafts
• Teach discrete skills (corresponding to rubric categories) and evaluate student practice via smaller pre-assignments.
• Lower the stakes of preliminary assignments.
• Consider providing feedback at multiple steps.

Feedback/Rewrites
• Approach your feedback as a dialogue:
  o Grading becomes developmental instead of punitive
• Read the entire assignment before commenting:
  o Avoid scattered, reactionary commenting.
  o Comment strategically: Students can only absorb so many ideas.
  o Consider reading/commenting in multiple passes/reads (e.g., once for Higher Order Concerns such as ideas, organization, argument, and evidence/analysis and again for Lower Order Concerns such as grammar, style, and citation).
  o Comment on success: Students don’t always know what they’ve done well and should continue doing.
  o Connect rubric items to specific places in the assignment.
  o Save time with electronic submissions and feedback.
• Consider offering opportunities for rewrite based on feedback:
  o Enforce a short timeframe for (optional) resubmission.
  o Require students to annotate their revisions and reflect upon what changed/why it’s improved.
  o Explain how re-grading will work (Extra points? Averaging? Entirely new grade?).