Assignments and Homework 1

Writing assignments and homework are two of the most common ways in which instructors give students an opportunity to develop, apply and demonstrate new knowledge. These assignments can take many forms: short papers, research papers, problem sets, lab reports, and so forth. Such assignments are also an important means of summative assessment, providing us with grades that we hope reflect students' level of effort and learning.

For these reasons, assignments and homework are an important part of the learning process. Therefore, they deserve a fair degree of attention on your part if you hope to make your course a valuable learning experience for students. This module will walk you through some of the basics of preparing and presenting homework and writing assignments. It is important to keep three main points in mind:

- You should be clear and specific with students about what your goals and expectations are for each assignment;
- The nature and construction of each assignment should reflect the learning goals you articulated when you created the course;
- The assignments you create for students should be challenging but not intimidating or overwhelming.

General Principles for Homework and Written Assignments

While there are important differences in the format and nature of homework and written assignments, both are directed at giving students the opportunity to develop and display particular skills and knowledge. And both have, as their main goal, the facilitation of student learning.

Thus, despite differences, certain general principles apply if you want the assignments you create to be effective learning tools:

- Present each assignment verbally and in writing.

Presenting the assignment to students verbally gives them a chance to ask you questions and discuss any concerns they may have. A written handout allows you to state your expectations in greater detail and gives students something to refer back to as they work.

- Clearly outline your expectations.

The written handout (one for each assignment) should clearly articulate what you expect from students, and how they will be graded.

- Test the assignment on yourself and others.

If you are assigning problem sets, solve them yourself to see where students might struggle and where directions are unclear. If you are giving a written assignment, read the directions and/or have friends do so to help you make sure that what you have written is specific and easily understood.

• Consider having multiple, shorter assignments.
Particularly early in the term, it can be useful to have many, smaller assignments as opposed to few, larger ones. Shorter assignments seem less intimidating to students.

They also give students a chance to learn your standards and expectations, and such assignments enhance student motivation by minimizing the damage a poor grade (on any one assignment) can do to their learning experience.

• Consider separating the tasks for younger learners.
In lower division classes, where students are still being exposed to college-level work, break large projects into chunks. Rather than assigning a term paper and waiting to collect it at the end of the term, have students first write a proposal, then compile a bibliography, then submit a first draft and then turn in the final paper. In the sciences, you might have students write an analysis of one experiment, then another, and then compare the two (Davis, 1993).

• Create realistic problems for students to work through.
You can help students see the direct application of the knowledge by giving them "real life" situations to work on. For instance, rather than asking architecture students to write about architectural excellence, ask them to draft a memo to a potential client about the criteria for excellence and how this can be judged (Davis, 1993).

• Track where students succeed and struggle.

As you read papers and grade problem sets, keep notes on which ideas or problems students do well with, and where they have difficulty. You can share this with students to facilitate their learning and it will help you in constructing future assignments.

Written Assignments

Written assignments include such things as reaction papers, analytical papers, and research or term papers. They are usually constructed around some question or issue that students are expected to respond to or discuss in some detail.

The following are some suggestions that you can use to make sure that the assignments you create and present are as effective and useful as possible:

• Be clear in defining the task you want students to undertake.
Generally, this means you must be very careful in the verbs you ask students to use. For instance, asking students to discuss charter schools is vague and broad; they have little direction or sense of what you want to see. However, if you ask them to compare and contrast two of the competing schools of thought in the debate over charter schools, or to select and evaluate one position, they have a more detailed sense of what you want them to do.

• Be clear about your expectations for the assignment.
The written handout should cover a range of questions. What type of paper is this (memo, essay, annotated bibliography, etc.)? How long will it need to be (in number of words rather than pages)? Will it need to be typed? Double-spaced? What criteria will you use to grade the paper? When is it due and how will you handle late papers?

In addition, there are several considerations you should make when you assign research papers to students (Davis, 1993):

- Know what you want students to gain from the experience.

Are they simply to develop a familiarity with various library resources? Is there a specific type of resource you want them to learn how to use? Should they be learning how to collect and evaluate material?

- Work with the library.

You should consult the campus library to be sure that they have the resources to actually support what you are asking students to do. Nothing is more frustrating than having the instructor require a citation from a particular journal only to find that the library does not carry it. Reference librarians are also often eager to teach a class on library resources and basic research skills.

- Do not put students in competition for the same material.

If you want all students to use one particular article or book, put multiple copies on reserve or distribute copies in class.

- Break the research paper into smaller tasks.

As noted above, younger students in particular may have trouble being told to "write a paper" and then hearing nothing until it is actually due. You can ease the learning process by identifying the key steps in developing a paper (topic identification, data collection, outline, draft, final product) and collecting products along the way to help students progress.

Homework

There are no hard-and-fast rules for how much homework (reading, writing, problem sets, etc.) students should be assigned. As a rule of thumb however, the expectation is that students will do two to three hours of work for each hour of in-class time (Davis, 1993).

- Determine when you prefer to announce homework.

Some instructors like to present all the homework assignments to students at the start of the term (so students can allocate their time) while others distribute them piece-by-piece. Some instructors like to hand out assignments at the start of class while others prefer to do so at the end.

- Coordinate the homework with lectures and readings.

Do not give students homework problems when you have not yet covered that material in class or in assigned readings. Homework should be a chance for students to apply knowledge and skills they have learned.

- Create a reasonable, even load of homework.

Distribute assignments over the course of the term rather than having them compressed near the beginning, middle or end of the semester.

- Make the first assignment a review.

Doing this allows you to assess students' prior knowledge. You can then talk with students for whom the course may not be appropriate and gauge your teaching to the overall level of student knowledge.

- Balance routine and challenging problems.

Too great a concentration of either type of problem will cause students to be frustrated and lose interest. Mix problems that force students to think with some that build their confidence and let them practice basic skills.

- You can grade selectively.

It is not necessary for you to grade every part of every problem set. You might, for instance, tell students you will grade three problems on every homework but that the others are also fair game for quizzes and tests.

- Collect the homework at the start of class when it is due.

If you wait until the end of the class session, students will feel they can come late and still get the assignment in "on time."

- Vary the type of homework you assign.

It is not necessary always to assign problem sets to students. You might periodically ask them to summarize the main concepts or ideas from the course up to that point. This helps them synthesize and reflect on what they have been learning.

- Be prompt in returning homework.

If you expect students to submit material to you on time, then you must be prompt in returning it to them. In addition, feedback on assignments is most useful to student learning when it comes within a reasonable time period of when the work was turned in.

- Find out how long students are spending on homework.

It is easy for teachers to underestimate the amount of time homework will take students to complete. Make it a point to check in periodically with the students to find out how much time most of them are spending to complete the assignment.

Source

Davis, Barbara Gross. (1993). Tools for Teaching.
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.