



## 8 Tips for Refreshing Assignment Guidelines

by [Ilka Kostka](#) and [Cristine McMartin-Miller](#)

An important part of preparing for the upcoming school year is developing assignment guidelines and accompanying rubrics. Though busy teachers often reuse materials, looking at assignment guidelines with fresh eyes is an excellent way to ensure that they are up-to-date and ready for students. In this article, we invite teachers to examine their assignment descriptions and consider the following eight elements when designing and reviewing assignments. Though we wrote these tips with higher education courses in mind, most of them easily apply to other levels and contexts as well.

### 1. Connect the Assignment to the Goals of the Course

Ensure that all assignments, ranging from low-stakes homework to major course assignments, connect to the major goals of the course. This element is particularly important for not assigning “busy work” that serves little purpose and takes students’ time away from meaningful tasks. Each assignment should also include learning objectives that are precise, measurable, and focused on what students can do (Richards, 2017).

The following example shows objectives that were revised to be more measurable and relevant to the overarching goal of an English language course for international students. One of the course goals stated in the syllabus is to strengthen students’ spoken intelligibility and listening comprehension skills in preparation for the academic listening and speaking tasks students will engage in during graduate school.

**Original assignment objectives:** After completing this assignment, you should be able to improve your knowledge of English consonants.

**Revised objectives:** After completing this assignment, you should be able to:

1. Produce all 24 English consonant sounds accurately.
2. Distinguish among consonant sounds you hear in an authentic academic lecture.

### 2. Foster Transparency

The Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) Project states that “transparent teaching methods help students understand *how and why* they are learning course content in particular

ways” (n.d.). By focusing on the purposes, tasks, and criteria for their academic work, students can better understand the reasons they are completing an assignment and how the assignment will improve their learning. For example, in the guidelines for a survey report assigned in one of our graduate-level writing courses, we included the following:

This assignment will familiarize you with the type of research and writing you might do as part of a quantitative or mixed methods research paper in graduate school. You will gain additional knowledge of your topic, as well as practice email etiquette, writing logical survey questions, creating an online survey, and summarizing results clearly and concisely.

### 3. Ensure That language Is Consistent and Accessible

An assignment can be effectively designed, but if students struggle to understand what they need to do, they can quickly become frustrated. Using the same language across assignments is one way to help students become familiar with our expectations. For instance, in all assignments in our writing courses, we consistently use the term “organization” to refer to paragraph formation, coherence, and unity among ideas throughout the paper. Using another word in a different assignment to refer to the same concept (e.g., “essay structure”) may be confusing. You should therefore check that you are using consistent language and may even consider putting the criteria in the same order across all rubrics. Likewise, avoid using jargon or unnecessarily complex vocabulary when writing assignment guidelines.

### 4. Address Expectations for Academic Integrity in Each Assignment

Explanations of academic integrity policies are typically included in course syllabi. However, you should also include policies for using outside sources in each particular assignment as these policies may vary among individual tasks. For instance, students should know if they need to cite images on slides or to what extent they can collaborate with others. If matched text detection software is used in a writing class, be clear about its purpose and whether students can see their originality reports before the due date. Students should also know how to access these reports and whether their papers will be stored in an online repository. Also make students aware of any penalties for academic integrity violations. Figure 1 includes an example of information about incorporating images appropriately on slides for an oral presentation, as posted in Canvas.

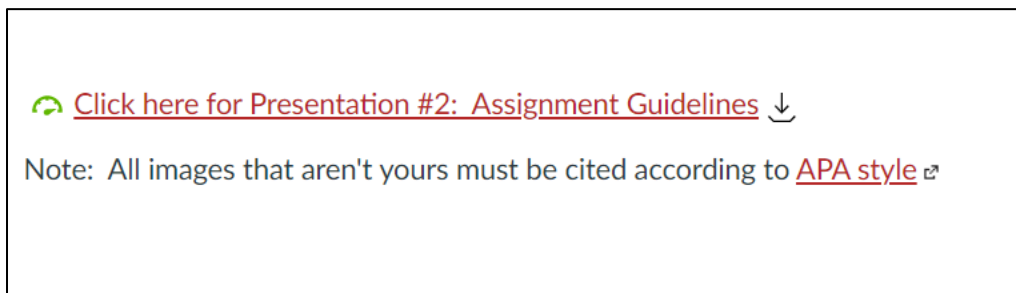


Figure 1. Excerpt of academic integrity guidelines for an oral presentation.

## 5. Make Submission Information Explicit

Submission information may seem obvious to teachers, but students may not know basic information if it is not stated clearly, such as

- how and where to submit an assignment, especially in online courses or distance learning;
- formatting instructions, such as using Times New Roman or Arial fonts; and
- citations guidelines (a link to a trusted resource, e.g., [APA Style](#), within the instructions of each assignment is often welcome).

When reusing an assignment from a previous class, ensure that all due dates have been updated. The assignment instructions should also include reminders about late work and zero submissions (e.g., whether points will be deducted from a student’s grade). Finally, some instructors find that requiring specific naming conventions for files—for example, “Last Name, First Name\_Assignment Name\_Month\_Day”—reduces confusion and the possibility of students submitting the wrong item.

## 6. Include Information About Assessment

Assessment is a critical component of any assignment, as we need to measure whether students have met the assignment’s objectives and can demonstrate learning. In our English language programs, we typically give students a variety of formative and summative assessments, such as writing assignments, discussion board posts, exit slips, quizzes, and oral presentations. We develop and make rubrics available to students in our learning management system well in advance so that they know exactly which criteria will be used to assess them.

Figure 2, for instance, is a participation rubric we introduce and explain during the first week of classes, a week before we use it to assess students.

Participation					
Participation					
Criteria	Ratings				Pts
Attendance	<b>3 pts</b> <b>Full Marks</b> Student was on time to all classes OR had emailed instructor in advance of class to excuse absence or tardiness.	<b>2 pts</b> <b>Partially Meets Expectations</b> Student was late by more than ten minutes once without emailing the instructor in advance but attended all classes.	<b>1 pts</b> <b>Does Not Meet Expectations</b> Student was late twice or more OR missed a class without emailing the instructor in advance.	<b>0 pts</b> <b>No Marks</b> Student did not attend classes and did not email instructor in advance.	3 pts
Preparedness	<b>3 pts</b> <b>Full Marks</b> Throughout the week, student brought all materials necessary to participate in class activities and discussions. Student appeared engaged in class activities. Student adequately answered direct questions from instructor.	<b>2 pts</b> <b>Partially Meets Expectations</b> Student lacked necessary materials, did not appear engaged, or could not answer direct questions once.	<b>1 pts</b> <b>Does Not Meet Expectations</b> Student lacked necessary materials, did not appear engaged, or could not answer direct questions twice or more.	<b>0 pts</b> <b>No Marks</b> Student did not attend classes.	3 pts
Community Building	<b>4 pts</b> <b>Full Marks</b> Student asked questions and commented voluntarily. Student's contributions added interest to class discussions. Student was inclusive by speaking primarily in English. Student was respectful to classmates and instructor.	<b>3 pts</b> <b>Partially Meets Expectations</b> One the required criteria were missing once.	<b>2 pts</b> <b>Does Not Meet Expectations</b> Two of the required criteria were missing, or one criteria was missing twice or more.	<b>0 pts</b> <b>No Marks</b> Student did not attend classes.	4 pts
Total Points: 10					

Figure 2. Sample participation rubric.

## 7. Provide Resources for Support

Teachers typically include information about student support resources in their syllabi, such as how to access peer tutoring services or the campus disability resource center. However, it is worth including information about specific resources for each assignment in the assignment guidelines, as well. For instance, the contact information for a writing center may not help students who are working on an oral presentation but would be useful reminder within the guidelines for a paper. Making connections to course materials (e.g., a specific chapter in a textbook or particular readings) can also help students complete a particular assignment.

## 8. Keep a Running List of Revisions for Future Classes

We suggest keeping an ongoing list of any changes made to assignments while a class progresses and everything is fresh in mind. If there are multiple teachers of the same course, a shared document (e.g., a Google Doc) can be used to facilitate communication. Within the document, teachers can add any feedback they receive from students about assignments, including through informal check-ins and teaching evaluations at the end of the term, as well as their own thoughts about an assignment. In this way, updating assignment guidelines and rubrics is a simpler and more straightforward process that does not rely as much on memory after a course has finished.

## Conclusion

Strategically refining assignment descriptions is one critical way to foster a productive learning experience and contribute to students' success. As we hope we've shown, reflecting on

assignment guidelines using the eight elements we described can ensure that they are relevant to the course and accessible to students.

## References

Richards, J. C. (2017). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

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