

Planning for Assignments

Most faculty members provide written instructions for the assignments required in their courses. But when we're teaching online, we need to be even more proactive if we want to ensure our students can do their work independently.

One way to provide this support is through intentional redundancy. When I design a course, I post the directions for each assignment in at least three places. First, I explain the assignment in the lecture for the week in which it's first introduced, including any benchmarks, deliverables, or deadlines that might be appropriate. Next, I post detailed written instructions in the assignments area of the course where students will submit their work. I also post the same instruction document in the folder for the week in which the assignment is introduced and the week it's due, especially if students will have more than two weeks to complete their work. Last, I'll email a copy of the instructions as an attachment to my weekly communication with students. Taking the time to build in this redundancy can save aggravation down the road, preventing us from having to reply to repetitive student questions about where they can find the instructions, when the assignment is due, or what we expect. If you don't want to re-post the same document in multiple areas, you can provide a hyperlink to each document in the LMS or a reminder of where the document is located so that students can access it with minimal difficulty.

Beyond instructions, it's helpful to provide students with examples of what you expect in each assignment, showing them what high-quality work ought to look like. For instance, some students inevitably exhibit difficulty with formatting correct citations in research papers. I proactively provide an excerpt from an annotated sample paper so that students can see exactly how to create citations. Similarly, a course I formerly taught asked students to write a paper that aligned with an exact set of requirements that students routinely misinterpreted. I couldn't change the assignment itself because I was not the course developer, so I created a supplementary handout with a better explanation of the instructions. I also provided a sample of a previous student's paper (with the student's name redacted) as a reference to guide students' work. Taking this step dramatically improved the quality of subsequent papers.

Communicating due dates for online instruction can be a bit more complex than in a face-to-face course. Everything is available to students all at once in an online classroom. This differs from our work on campus, where we tend to distribute actual materials from week to week. When we teach an online course a second time, the course content is usually imported from the previous course, so the due dates or deadlines stated on our course materials will no longer be accurate when we teach the course again. It's tedious to manually revise every item to reflect the new dates, so I recommend referring to due dates in your instructional materials by weeks and days instead of by date, then creating an updated course calendar each time you teach the same course. (Many online instructional systems offer this as a built-in tool.) Students can refer to the calendar for specific due dates rather than expecting to see these on the materials you created. It's also helpful to inform students of specific dates in your weekly emails. For example, "Assignment 3 is due at the end of Week 5, which is Sunday, February 6, 2021."

Our goal is not just for students to *do* the work we assign – all of the tasks we ask them to do should support their *learning*. Moreover, students should always know why we ask them to do something, how it relates to the course's outcomes and objectives, what the expectations for success might be, and how to meet those expectations. Building all of this into your online course will maximize their learning.