



**Center for Teaching and Learning**  
*Stanford University, Stanford CA*



**Designing Effective Writing Assignments**

**Work Backwards:**

Decide which skill you want the assignment to develop, and start from there to design an assignment that will require students to go through all of the necessary steps towards building that skill.

**Define the Task:**

Use active, specific verbs when describing the assignment; avoid vague verbs such as *discuss*, *tell*, and *explore*. Even *analyze* can be vague if you have not already specified what counts as an analysis in your discipline.

**Create Realistic Writing Situations:**

Ask your students to write for a real audience that has a genuine need for information. Especially if you are working in a problem-based learning class format with the students broken up into teams, each student is then responsible for providing a certain amount or kind of information to their team members. In this scenario the stakes are particularly high, and the audience is well-defined.

**De-Mystify the Assignment:**

Tell your students what the skills are that you want them to develop while completing the assignment, as well as what the steps are that you think they will have to take in order to develop this skill. This will help the students stay on track, and will keep them confident as they learn a new discipline.

**Explain your Grading Guidelines:**

Avoid student bafflement and resentment when you return their papers by handing out a clear set of guidelines for how you will be grading their assignments, either with the syllabus on day one, or with each assignment if you will be using a different set of guidelines and specifications for each one. Which qualities are you looking for? How will they break down in terms of percentages?

**Target Accessible Topics:**

Try not to send an entire class in search of the same information; unless, of course, you have the info posted on the web where everyone will have equal access to it. Once again, a team format ensures that a variety of topics will be researched and that you will have a various, instead of monotonous, reading experience!

**(And finally...)**

Do yourself and the students a favor! Specify a Style Manual for your class.