SUCCESS WITH THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT

Helping students succeed in their first assignment

Careful planning and thought into **when** the first assignment is scheduled, and **what form** the assignment takes, is key to helping your students succeed.

Scheduling the assessment

Ideally the first assignment needs to occur early in the semester. Not only will this encourage students to engage early in the course, but it will also allow them time to incorporate feedback from the first assignment into subsequent assessments. However, when scheduling the assignment, it is also important to consider the size and depth of the assignment, and the weighting or number of marks allocated. Including too many difficult concepts that have only just been introduced, and weighting the assignment too heavily will reduce the students' chances of success.

Types of assessment

Consider the format of the assessment, and ensure that it aligns with the Learning Outcomes of the paper (**constructive alignment**). For example, if students need to be able to solve a problem or present an experiment, the assessment might be a **report**, whereas if they need to formulate an argument, the assessment might be an **essay**. If students need to be able to define key terms, assessment might take the form of an **online multiple choice test**.

Assessments commonly used in the first year include:

- Essays
- Reports
- Lab reports
- Online tests
- Literature reviews
- Annotated bibliographies.

Be sure that you are clear about what type of written task you are expecting, and refer students to OWLL for detailed information about the specific requirements of different writing tasks.

Writing assessment instructions

Once you have decided on the format, make sure that your expectations are clearly and succinctly stated for the students. Remember, less is more! However, your information for the student should include:

- The assignment word limit (is there 10% leeway and how will this be enforced?)
- What the assignment is worth.
- When the assignment is due.
- The format of the assignment:
  - If it is a report or a lab report, what headings should the student use and in what order?
  - If it is an essay, is it a traditional essay or may students use headings?
  - If it is a reflective essay, do students realise they may use the first person?

- The actual question to be answered or precise problem to be solved (keep your instructions short and simple).
- Where students can go for help such as links to OWLL, the online assignment calculator, and information about writing and study skills workshops from local Centres for Teaching and Learning. (Remember consultants from your local centre can work with you to run sessions for your students.)
- The marking criteria (where appropriate). If you are using a rubric (a scoring tool or grid with clearly stated criteria and standards of attainment, tied directly to the assessment learning outcomes) make sure that your students understand the criteria and how a rubric is used.
  - How many references you expect to see and some ideas about how and where they could find suitable references.
- Information about using Turnitin (if appropriate).

Things to check

If you have set a word or time limit, check that **you** can do the assignment within that limit.

Do your instructions make sense to others? Getting peers or a teaching and learning consultant to review your instructions can be very helpful.

Facilitating the process

Many first year students experience considerable anxiety when faced with their first assessments. You can help ameliorate this during your classes in the weeks preceding the due date by:

- introducing the assessment early
- providing students with an idea of how long you would expect the assignment to take them
- providing regular indications of where students should be in the process, e.g. reading/summarising, planning, drafting, more reading, 2nd draft, final polishing
- consider creating formative assessment tasks that support the development of strategies, skills and knowledge required for the assessment.

Academic integrity

It is important to discuss what plagiarism is, and why it is important that students take every care to avoid plagiarising, from both the educational perspective and the impact on their marks. Although most students understand the blatant forms of plagiarism, such as direct copying, many are unaware of more subtle forms. Directing students to this website may help to clarify things for them.

Giving feedback

Giving timely, constructive feedback has a positive effect on student progress. Feedback refers not only to the comments and constructive criticism offered on marking of the completed assignment, but also to the way in which lecturers respond to student questions during the assignment writing process. Your participation in, and prompt responses to, Stream discussions about assignment expectations will help your students to understand the task completely.

Further reading

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Maidenhead, NY: McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Donnison, S., & Penn-Edwards, S. (2012). Focusing on first year assessment: Surface or deep approaches to learning? *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 3*(2). 9-20. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v3i2.1

Hunt, L., & Chalmers, D. (Eds.). (2012). *University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach*. Victoria, Australia: Acer Press.