Creating “Transparent” Assignments For Equitable Student Success
Mary-Ann Winkelmes

Transparent teaching/learning practices make learning processes explicit while offering opportunities to foster students’ metacognition, confidence, and their sense of belonging in college. A 2016 Association of American Colleges & Universities publication identifies transparent assignment design as a replicable teaching intervention that significantly enhances students’ learning and persistence, with greater gains for historically underserved students [Winkelmes et al, Peer Review, Spring 2016]. Transparent assignments that offer equitable opportunities for all students to succeed are critical to first year programs. In this workshop, we'll review recent findings as well as educational research behind the concept of transparent teaching/learning. Then we'll apply that research to the design of class activities and assignments. Participants will leave with a draft assignment or activity for one of their courses, and a concise set of strategies for designing transparent assignments that promote students' learning equitably.

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<th>Research on Learning</th>
<th>Implications for Assignments</th>
<th>Possible Applications</th>
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| Elbow, Jaschik/Davidson, Mazur, Ambrose, Bergstahler Gregorc, Kolb | • Varied / flexible formats are inclusive appeal equitably to student strengths  
• Low stakes for greater creativity / risk | 1 |
| AAC&U HIPs, Bass, Bloom, Colomb, Felder, Perry | • Build critical thinking skills in intentional sequence  
• Provide a compass, set expectations  
• Target feedback to phase, don’t overwhelm | 2 |
| Doyle, Felder, Tanner, Winkelmes | • Specify relevant knowledge/skills, criteria  
• Encourage self-monitoring | 3 |
| Fiske/Light, Tanner | • Provide annotated examples of successful work w/ criteria applied, before students begin work. | 4 |
| Aronson, Dweck, Fisk, Light, Schnabel, Spitzer, Steele, Treisman Yeager/Walton, Vygosky | • Structure and require peer instruction, feedback; positive attribution activities | 5 |
| Finley/McNair, Winkelmes et al., Yeager, Walton | • Explicate purpose, task, criteria before  
• Explicate applicability, relevance;  
• Engage students in applying shared criteria to increase belonging. | 6 |

Possible Applications:

1. Varied / flexible formats are inclusive appeal equitably to student strengths  
   Low stakes for greater creativity / risk

2. Build critical thinking skills in intentional sequence  
   Provide a compass, set expectations  
   Target feedback to phase, don’t overwhelm

3. Specify relevant knowledge/skills, criteria  
   Encourage self-monitoring

4. Provide annotated examples of successful work w/ criteria applied, before students begin work.

5. Structure and require peer instruction, feedback; positive attribution activities

6. Explicate purpose, task, criteria before  
   Explicate applicability, relevance;  
   Engage students in applying shared criteria to increase belonging.
Bibliography:


Elbow, Peter. “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning,* no. 69, (Spring 1997).


Tanner, Kimberly B. “Promoting Student Metacognition.” *CBE Life Sciences Education* 11, 2 (June 4, 2012): 113-120.


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Music in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s  
*The Phantom of the Opera*

**Argument:** Andrew Lloyd Webber’s orchestration relies on conventional Western styles of musical phrasing and instrumentation. It exploits the natural tendencies of music to correspond with the ebb and flow of emotions, and allows the music to reflect the mood and/or tone of a scene, thereby making the musical accessible to a large general audience.

1) **Introduction**
   a. The popularity of Phantom and its music
   b. Possible reasons: story, spectacle, characters

2) **Critics of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s music**
   a. What reviewers criticize
   b. Why the are wrong

3) **Why the music does deserve praise**
   a. Tactics of Western music that Lloyd Webber uses
   b. Exploits the natural tendencies of musical phrasing
   c. Orchestrates the numbers with instruments commonly associated with different moods
   d. Relies on recurring themes, bringing back melodies associated in audience’s memories with certain characters and types.
   e. In scenes with romantic implications, couples orchestration with rhythm of the lyrics to amplify sensuous overtones and transmit amatory expectations.

[outline continues]

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**Guide for Preparing Your Paper**

What is your topic?  What position will you take on that topic?

What are the major primary and secondary sources essential to this topic? List full citations

What main pieces of evidence will support your idea(s) about the topic?

What are possible counterarguments? What evidence might support these?

What are some possible ways to refute counterarguments? What evidence can be used?

What problems or questions do you have?
2. Build students’ critical thinking skills in an intentional sequence

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<th>Assignment</th>
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* from American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business "Assurance of Learning Standards," in Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards...
# from Benjamin Bloom, Taxonomy of Educational Objectives
3. Specify criteria and encourage students’ self-monitoring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Addressing the question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>      the relevance of the content of the essay to the question or topic</td>
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<td>      Develop essay theme, ideas, or other main points of the essay</td>
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<td>      Use transitional words or phrases to show the reader how one idea relates to the next</td>
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<td>      Use the appropriate transition words or phrases to link ideas</td>
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<tr>
<th>2. Using evidence</th>
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<td>      Use evidence from a variety of sources, such as research reports, books, or other reliable sources</td>
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<th>3. Developing argument</th>
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<tr>
<td>      Develop arguments and supporting evidence throughout the essay</td>
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<th>4. Critical evaluation/analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>      Determine the value, significance, strengths, and weaknesses of the evidence used in the essay</td>
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<th>5. Structuring</th>
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<tr>
<td>      Use a logical structure and organization of ideas in the essay</td>
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<td>      Use a logical structure and organization of ideas in the essay</td>
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<th>6. Use of language</th>
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<td>      Use appropriate language appropriate for the discipline</td>
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<th>VII. Choosing Sources of Information</th>
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<td>      Use appropriate sources of information</td>
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<th>VIII. Choosing the Type of Question</th>
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<td>      Use appropriate type of question</td>
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<td>      Use appropriate type of question</td>
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| Example: "What are the key components of the scientific method?" |
| Example: "What are the key components of the scientific method?" |

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4. Provide annotated example of successful work, before students begin working

Carol Augspurger, School of Integrative Biology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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INTRODUCTION (4-5 paragraphs)

Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors affect the relative population size of species of small mammals in local habitats. Extrinsic factors may include the amount of food availability (Bell 1989), presence of competing species (Holt et al. 1995), and the presence of predators (Batzli and Lin 2001). Intrinsic factors may relate to their diet and food preferences (Heskie 2004), competitive ability (Holt et al. 1995), and body shape (Hoffmeister 1989) that affects their speed and agility in escaping predators. Differences in these factors are expected to result in varying population sizes of species of small mammals among local habitats. Understanding the factors that affect a species’ population size is important because it allows us to predict how changes in the environment will affect its population dynamics and the community structure.

Augspurger et al. (2007) found that the relative population sizes of small mammals differed in successional old fields of contrasting age. Specifically, their four years of live trapping showed that voles have a large population in a field abandoned one year ago, while shrews have a larger population size in a field.

Sample Glossary Entry:

History 251/Art 495, Mary-Ann Winklemes

in a Christian church, semicircular area at the end of the nave beyond the transept or choir.
Peer Response Sheet

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1. List at least two things you like about the paper.
2. List at least two ways in which the essay could be improved.
3. Was there anything in the paper that seemed confusing to you? (If so, explain.)
4. Underline the thesis statement. Is it clearly stated? If not, what seems confusing?
5. Is there any place where the writer needs to support an idea with more concrete detail?
6. How well does the writer make transitions between his/her main ideas? Identify places that need better transitions.
7. Last but not least, two ways in which the essay may improve.
8. What would you like to know more about? What questions do you still have?

Peer: ____________________________ Reader: ____________________________

Re: Feedback below or on separate sheet(s) of paper

Record your responses to the following questions either in the spaces below or on separate sheet(s) of paper.

1. What single feature of the paper stands out to you as a reader?
2. What do you think is the writer's main point?
3. Was there anything in the paper that seemed confusing to you? (If so, explain.)
4. Can you answer the question, "I don't know?"
5. If the paper reads as "so what?" point that out. If the paper reads as "interesting, surprising, intriguing," etc., note that in your response.

5. Structure Peer Instruction Activities and Peer Feedback

http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/peer-response-sheet

Peer: ____________________________ Reader: ____________________________

Review your responses to the following questions either in the spaces below or on separate sheet(s) of paper.

1. List at least two things you like about the paper.
2. List at least two ways in which the essay could be improved.
3. Was there anything in the paper that seemed confusing to you? (If so, explain.)
4. Can you answer the question, "I don't know?"
5. If the paper reads as "so what?" point that out. If the paper reads as "interesting, surprising, intriguing," etc., note that in your response.

Peers: ____________________________ Readers: ____________________________
6. Explicate purpose, task(s), and criteria for students’ work in advance

Transparent Assignment Design Template*
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This template can be used as a guide for developing, explaining, and discussing class activities and out-of-class assignments. Making these aspects of each course activity or assignment explicitly clear to students has demonstrably enhanced students’ learning in a national study.

Assignment Name
Due date:

**Purpose:** Define the learning objectives, in language and terms that help students recognize how this assignment will benefit their learning. Indicate how these are connected with institutional learning outcomes, and how the specific knowledge and skills involved in this assignment will be important in students’ lives beyond the contexts of this assignment, this course, and this college.

**Skills:** The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in profession / in life beyond school:

Terms from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives may help you explain these skills in language students will understand. Listed from cognitively simple to most complex, these skills are:

- understanding basic disciplinary knowledge and methods/tools
- applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- creating/inventing a new interpretation, product, theory

**Knowledge:** This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:


**Task:** Define what activities the student should do/perform. (“Question cues” from this chart might be helpful: http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf)

List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students’ work. Specify any extraneous steps/mistakes to be avoided.

**Criteria for Success.**

Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple, annotated examples of what these characteristics look like in practice, to encourage students’ creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. With students, collaboratively analyze examples of work before the students begin working. Explain how excellent work differs from adequate work. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful work. This enables students to evaluate the quality of their own efforts while they are working, and to judge the success of their completed work. Students can also use the checklist to provide feedback on peers’ coursework. Indicate whether this task/product will be graded and/or how it factors into the student’s overall grade for the course. Later, asking students to reflect and comment on their completed, graded work and flows them to focus on changes to their learning strategies that might improve their future work.

The author developed an earlier version of this template at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Make a rough sketch of the shape of the graph, and label the critical points and inflection points (x-value only).

- Make a sign diagram indicating where the function is increasing/decreasing.

<table>
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<th>Sample B</th>
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</table>

For the given function, find and simplify the 2nd derivative: $f(x) = x^3 - 3x^2 + 2x - 1$.

1. When you selected and why?
2. When you learned from them that was most interesting:
3. How this assignment helped you learn about your major/career:
4. What questions you still have?
5. Prepare a typed transcript of the questions and answers using the audio/video recording permission.
6. Write a 400-500 word reflection paper in which you address the following:
   - How else can you utilize the information you got from your interviewee?
   - Conduct a 20-30 minute face-to-face interview to gather knowledge on a particular academic discipline career field.
   - Prepare 5-10 questions to ask the professional about their knowledge of a career.
   - Secure an interview with the professional for a date and time that is convenient for both of you.

Sample A
Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to help you make an informed decision about the major/career you are considering.

Skills: This assignment will help you practice the following skills:
- Accessing and collecting information from appropriate primary and secondary sources.
- Composing a well-organized, clear, concise report that expands your knowledge on a subject in your major.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you become familiar with the following important concepts in the discipline:
- Issues facing professionals in a field.
- Scholarly research formats for documenting sources and creating reference pages (i.e., bibliographies).

Due dates:
- Sept 30 - Draft interview questions
- October 15 - Transcript of interviews
- November 1 - Report

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to help you make an informed decision about the major/career you are considering.

Skills: This assignment will help you practice the following skills:
- Accessing and collecting information from appropriate primary and secondary sources.
- Composing a well-organized, clear, concise report that expands your knowledge on a subject in your major.

Knowledge: This assignment will also help you become familiar with the following important concepts in the discipline:
- Issues facing professionals in a field.
- Scholarly research formats for documenting sources and creating reference pages (i.e., bibliographies).

Task:
1. Select two professionals in your prospective academic discipline and/or career field who are considered experts in an area in which you are interested.
2. Secure an interview with the professionals for a date and time that is convenient for both of you.
3. Prepare a list of 10 questions to ask the professionals about their expertise in a particular academic discipline/career field. The questions must be based on a review of the field using 5 credible sources as defined by the librarian in our research module. Sources should be cited using APA formatting.
4. Conduct a 20-30 minute face-to-face interview with each professional to gather knowledge that will help you make an informed decision about the major/career you are considering. You will want to audio/video record the interview with the interviewee's permission.
5. Prepare a typed transcript of the interviews.
6. Compare and contrast the information provided by both professionals in an 8-page (1.5 spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, 1 inch margins) report that documents the advantages and disadvantages of a career in the selected field.

Criteria for success: Please see the attached rubric.
Recent Findings: Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

A 2015 study (Winkelmes, et al., (Peer Review, Winter 2016) identified transparent teaching about problem-centered learning as an easily replicable teaching method that produces learning benefits already linked with students’ success. This simple, replicable teaching intervention demonstrably enhanced the success of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students in multiple ways at statistically significant levels, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. The results offer implications for how faculty and educational developers can help their institutions to right the inequities in college students’ educational experiences across the country by contributing to efforts to increase underserved students’ success, especially in their first year of college (when the greatest numbers drop out).

In 2014-2015 a group of 7 Minority Serving Institutions launched a pilot project that included 1180 students and 35 faculty. Tia McNair and Ashley Finley at the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) led the project in partnership with Mary-Ann Winkelmes at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas’ Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Project (TILT Higher Ed), with funding from TG Philanthropy. The main research goal was to study how faculty transparency about the design and problem-centered nature of student assignments would affect students’ learning experiences and the quality of students’ work. Faculty received training on how to make two take-home assignments in a course more transparent (accessible) and problem-centered (relevant) for students, and each instructor taught a control group and an intervention group of the same course in the same term. Results were measured via online surveys about students’ learning experiences before and after each course, and direct assessment of students’ work. Students who received more transparency reported gains in three areas that are important predictors of students’ success: academic confidence, sense of belonging, and mastery of the skills that employers value most when hiring. While the benefits for all students in the aggregate who received more transparency were statistically significant, the benefits for first-generation, low-income and underrepresented students were greater, with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect. Important studies have already connected academic confidence and sense of belonging with students’ greater persistence and higher grades (Walton and Cohen 2011, Aronson et al 2002, Paunesku et al 2015), and recent national surveys identify the skills that employers value most when hiring new employees (Hart 2015 and 2013).

End of Term: Skills, Confidence, and Belonging - Less vs. More Transparent Courses, First Generation Students

![End of Term: Skills, Confidence, and Belonging - Less vs. More Transparent Courses, First Generation Students](image)

A study of 871 University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) students’ retention rates the following year indicated that increases to academic confidence, sense of belonging and perceived mastery of employer-valued skills were indeed followed by greater persistence. 85.65% of UNLV first-time, full-time, first-year students in primarily transparent courses in Fall 2016 were retained as registered students in Fall 2017, in contrast to the average retention rate of 77.1% for first-time, full-time, first-year students. As in the AAC&U study, the gains were greater for underserved students.

TILT Higher Ed and the AAC&U continue to promote transparency and problem-centered learning. TILT Higher Ed participants include more than 25,000 students in hundreds of courses at over 40 higher education institutions in the U.S. and five other countries.

Publications and information about the Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project are at: [www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning](http://www.unlv.edu/provost/teachingandlearning)

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The Unwritten Rules:
Decode Your Assignments and
Decipher What’s Expected of You

Did you know?

• UNLV researchers demonstrated in a national study that transparency around academic assignments enhances students’ success -- especially that of first-generation, low-income and underrepresented college students -- at statistically significant levels (with a medium-to-large sized magnitude of effect for underserved students). [Winkelmes et al., Peer Review 2016]
• When faculty make the purpose, tasks and criteria of an academic assignment clear before students begin to work on it, students are more likely to experience greater academic success with that assignment, developing the knowledge, disposition, and skills necessary to succeed both at school and in life (in comparison to when students experience less clarity around purpose, tasks and criteria for their academic work). [Winkelmes et al., Peer Review 2016]
• For UNLV students, benefits also included a significantly higher rate of returning to college the following year. [Gianoutsos and Winkelmes, PADE Proceedings 2016].
• An inclusive learning environment benefits all students and offers more equitable learning opportunities for underserved students. Research on student learning links college students’ academic confidence and sense of belonging with higher GPAs, persistence and retention rates [Walton and Cohen, Science, 18 March, 2011].
• College students increased their test scores when supported by a system that advocated the belief that intelligence is not fixed but rather malleable. A year later, these students were 80% less likely to drop out of college [Aronson et al, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 38, 2 (2002)].

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO:

Before you begin working on an assignment or class activity, ask the instructor to help you understand the following. (Bring this document to help frame the conversation.)

Purpose

• Skills you'll practice by doing this assignment
• Content knowledge you'll gain from doing this assignment
• How you can use these in your life beyond the context of this course, in and beyond college

Task

• What to do
• How to do it (Are there recommended steps? What roadblocks/mistakes should you avoid?)

Criteria

• Checklist (Are you on the right track? How to know you’re doing what’s expected?)
• Annotated examples of successful work
  (What’s good about these examples? Use the checklist to identify the successful parts.)


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DRAFT Checklist for Designing a Transparent Assignment
Thank you for helping to test this DRAFT checklist. Please send your suggestions and feedback to mary-ann.winkelmes@unlv.edu

**PURPOSE:**

**Skills**
- Does your purpose statement specify content knowledge that students will gain from doing this assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular knowledge to the larger context of:
  - recent topics of class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major?
  - the discipline?
  - your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your purpose statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course?
  - beyond the major?
  - beyond college?

**Knowledge**
- Does your purpose statement specify a skill or skill set that students will practice while doing the assignment?
- Does your purpose statement link that particular skill/skill set to examples/contexts where this skill was important in the context of:
  - recent class sessions?
  - this part of the course?
  - the whole course?
  - the major?
  - the discipline?
  - your institution's main learning outcomes?
- Does your statement indicate the relevance and/or usefulness of this knowledge to the students' lives:
  - beyond the course?
  - beyond the major?
  - beyond college?
- Would this assignment benefit from segmenting it into several assignments, each one focused on a discrete set of skills that should be mastered to insure students' successful completion of the next assignment in the sequence?

**TASK:**
- Does your description of the task:
  - Identify the very first thing students should do when they begin working on the assignment?
  - The very next thing they should do?
  - The next, etc.
- Does your description of the task help students to avoid wasting their time on unnecessary steps, unproductive time expenditure?
- Does your description help students to focus their time efficiently on producing the highest quality work possible in the time given?
- Would students benefit from some practice exercises (in the form of a pre-task) in class to prepare them to perform the task outside of class on the graded assignment?

**CRITERIA:**
- Can students use the criteria while they are working on the assignment to determine whether they are completing the assignment efficiently and effectively?
- Do the criteria take the form of a checklist students can use to evaluate the quality of their efforts while they are working on the assignment?
- Does the checklist specify characteristics of high quality work for this assignment?
- Can you help students apply the checklist to evaluating some sample work in class, so they understand how each criterion would look in practice?
- With your guidance, can the students collaboratively annotate several examples of work to indicate where/how the work satisfies the criteria? (These annotated examples may then be shared as a reference for students to use while they work on their own assignments.)
- Would a rubric (AAC&U VALUE examples) be helpful to students for this assignment?
- Does the rubric provide an amount of information that helps students at this phase in their learning?
- Does the rubric provide an overwhelming or counterproductive amount of information for students at this phase in their learning?
- Did you provide examples of good work, annotated to identify exactly where and how this work satisfies your criteria?
- Can you provide students with examples in class so they and you can test out your criteria checklist or rubric to be sure students know how to apply the criteria to multiple examples of work, and eventually their own work?