Pod A: Equitable Assignments and Assessment

# Choosing Assignments and Assessments

While teaching practices have largely evolved to recognize that students learn in different ways, assessment practices have often remained static, with a one-size-fits-all-model for evaluating student learning. Instead, you can provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their learning (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017).

# Alternative Modes

Consider one assessment you regularly assign and grade. This can be small (daily class participation), large (final exam or paper), or anywhere in between.

**Chart 1:** Use these questions to fill in the first chart below. Assignment as-is:

* What is the **central concept or skill** you hope to assess with this assignment? What is the learning objective for this assignment?
* What **evidence** do you look for to recognize student learning? How do students demonstrate their grasp of that concept or skill in this assessment? (Written or oral communication, recall abilities, creativity, etc.)
* What additional skills and **background knowledge** might students need in order to succeed that are *not* the central concept or skill you hope to assess?
* Are some of your students more likely to possess these skills and knowledge than others? How could you find out if there are **inequalities** at this level?

**Charts 2 & 3:** Now, think about alternatives and fi ll in the next two charts. Could students demonstrate their learning in another mode? Provide two alternatives. What evidence could you look for to recognize student learning in these modalities?

**Reflect:** What did you notice? What alternative ways of demonstrating learning might you offer to students?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Chart 1** | **Assignment as-is** |
| Brief assignment description |  |
| **Central concept or****skill** to assess |  |
| **Evidence** ofstudent learning |  |
| **Background**students need |  |
| Potential **inequalities** in these skills |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Chart 2** | **Assignment alternative 1 (assessing the same knowledge/skills as Chart 1 in a****different modality)** |
| Brief assignment description |  |
| **Central concept or****skill** to assess |  |
| **Evidence** ofstudent learning |  |
| **Background**students need |  |
| Potential **inequalities** in these skills |  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Chart 3** | **Assignment alternative 2 (assessing the same knowledge/skills as Chart 1 in a****different modality)** |
| Brief assignment description |  |
| **Central concept or****skill** to assess |  |
| **Evidence** ofstudent learning |  |
| **Background**students need |  |
| Potential **inequalities** in these skills |  |

# TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching)

Once you have settled on one or multiple formats for your assignments, you can evaluate them using the TILT tool. This model proposes that to ensure every assignment is clearly articulated, each assignment should include three key elements: purpose, task, and criteria.

* **Purpose:** Why are you asking students to do this? How can the skills they show here be applied? Some instructors break this category down into **skills** students will gain from completing the assignment and **knowledge** they will gain.
* **Task:** Defi ne the characteristics of the completed assignment. What will it look like? Detail how students can complete the assignment (perhaps including a step-by-step breakdown with a timeline).
* **Criteria for success:** You can include a checklist of essential components of the assignment, a rubric you will use for evaluation, and examples of successful work. You may also consider creating a list of your top ten tips to be successful in this class (e.g. participating in offi ce hours, asking questions, forming a study group, reading ahead of class, etc.)

Use this model for both high- and low-stakes assignments. If students are able to be successful on low-stakes assignments and your course assignments are scaffolded (each builds a skill for the next), then they will be building confidence and proficiency to tackle the larger assignments.

## Further Resources on TILT assignments

TILT Higher Ed Project: Includes video overviews of TILT, articles, and examples of assignments before and after TILTing

Checklist for Designing a Transparent Assignment: One page checklist with helpful questions as you design your TILTed assignment.

TILT Overview from UI

Bloom’s Critical Thinking Cue Questions: Can be helpful as you articulate to students what specific critical thinking skills the assignment will assess and help them develop.

Fink’s Taxonomy of Significant Learning: Can be helpful to refer to as you draft learning objectives and describe the skills and knowledge that your assignment will help students gain.

**Transparent Assignment Template**

*adapted from Winklemes Transparent Assignment Template*

### Purpose: *The purpose of this assignment is…*.

**Skills:** *Through this assignment we will practice the following skills, essential to academic and professional success:*

**Knowledge:** *Through this assignment we will become familiar with the following foundational knowledge in our course’s academic area:*

### Task: *To complete this assignment, we will….*

*[List steps and tasks to complete the assignment, along with relevant deadlines. Give guidelines and specify if there are errors to avoid. Connect these tasks to the purpose of the assignment where relevant.*

*\*If you have a sound pedagogical reason for withholding information about how to complete the assignment, protect students’ conﬁdence and sense of belonging in college by clearly articulating that they are meant to be confused and struggle with the assignment. E.g., “The purpose of this assignment is for you to struggle and feel confused while you invent and test your own approach to solving this problem.”\*]*

### Criteria for Success:

*[Deﬁne what a successful ﬁnished product looks like. You can include rubrics and multiple examples of successful work (past student examples used with permission, or real-world examples—giving multiple examples encourages students’ creativity and steers them away from copying one model too closely). Use class time to explain the differences between an excellent and an acceptable ﬁnished product. You can use these criteria to have students give peer feedback, and you can ask for student reﬂections after ﬁnishing the assignment to help you improve the assignment in the future.]*

# Additional Tips

* **Consider the frequency and scaffolding of assessment**--have many, low stakes assignments required for all that build to larger projects. Research shows that this diversified assessment structure helps to close traditional achievement gaps (Cotner & Ballen, 2017).
* **Build in opportunities for revision** based on meaningful feedback from you or peers. When do you offer feedback to your students? Do their final grades reflect their initial attempts, final products, and/or improvement over time?
* **Demystify grades and their purpose**. Share the rubric ahead of time and dissect in class. Allow students to ask questions and/or annotate the rubric with areas they don’t understand. For sample rubrics see AACU Value Rubrics Development Project; Rubistar.
* Reconsider how much weight is given to elements of the **grade related to mechanics and compliance**. Can you shift that weight toward demonstration of learning?
	+ If mechanics and compliance are important to you, make these expectations explicit, use class time to teach the mechanics and compliance skills you deem essential, and provide resources like the the Writing Center.
* Consider the **frequency and scaffolding of assessment.** Have many, low stakes assignments required for all that build to larger projects. Research shows that this diversified assessment structure helps to close traditional achievement gaps (Cotner & Ballen, 2017).
* Build in **opportunities for revision** based on meaningful feedback from you or peers. When do you offer feedback to your students? Do their final grades reflect their initial attempts, final products, and/or improvement over time?
* **Be flexible** with deadlines and build flexibility into your course schedule. Deducting points for late work emphasizes compliance but doesn’t measure student learning. Again, if meeting deadlines is an important learning outcome for you, consider including a section for professionalism in your rubric and making expectations explicit.
* **Give space for students** to demonstrate knowledge: add an additional blank page on exams with prompt, “Share what else you know about this topic that wasn’t on the exam.
* **Online exam proctoring platforms** are riddled with systemic biases. They are racist, sexist, ableist, and transphobic. For example, because of webcam design, students with darker skin may not show up as clearly on camera, and both live and automatic proctoring will flag these students, demand they put more light on their face, and sometimes disallow them from taking the exam altogether. There are privacy and surveillance concerns as well. Online proctoring platforms certainly surveil students, but it is not proven in any way that they deter cheating. Students who plan to cheat come up with creative workarounds. Instructors’ time is much better spent creating assessments that do not lend themselves to cheating, rather than using invasive and biased systems in an attempt to prevent it. See this [article](https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/07/1006132/software-algorithms-proctoring-online-tests-ai-ethics/) for more.
* **Alternative grading systems:** This may be the time to consider alternative grading systems that are often kinder both to you and your students.
	+ **Labor-based contract grading:** Instructor and class agree on a “contract” or basic set of assignments and labor to be completed. Grade is determined based on students’ labor and progress, not in reference to arbitrary “standard” or quality.
		- [Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom](https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/) by Asao Inoue
		- [“A Simple Alternative to Grading”](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ881563.pdf) by Glenda Potts
	+ **Student self-grading:** Students are invited to evaluate and assess themselves and their progress, while the instructor focuses on offering formative feedback on assignments and ways to encourage and support student learning and growth.
		- [“A Practice of Freedom”: Self-grading for Liberatory Learning](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hp3GZmqNwPsr-FqeGVqoNwSw6iZ2FjX7/view?usp=sharing) by Vicki Reitenauer
		- “[Why I Don’t Grade](https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/)” by Jesse Stommel

## How could I make a multiple choice exam more equitable?

**How could I make a short answer/written essay exam more equitable?**

* Create your rubric for grading or your points system *before* you give out the assessment. Next to each question, tell students how many points are assigned to each part of the question. This ensures that your question matches the points you are allocating to it.
* Give students extended time. Are you interested in evaluating how fast they think and write, or are you interested in evaluating the quality of their thoughts and writing? Consider allowing a take-home, open-book exam, which encourages students to focus on critical thinking and analysis, not memorization and recall.
* Give students options in the questions they can answer.
* Use guidelines for best practices in writing multiple choice questions that assess concepts and emphasize higher-order thinking instead of simple recall (See 14 Rules for Writing Multiple-Choice Questions).
* Give students a clear outline of what content will be covered on the exam and how they should study (which means writing the exam well ahead of time!).
* Clearly articulate the learning outcomes for the exam and share them with your students beforehand. What do you want them to learn by taking this assessment?
* Add *other* types of opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in the class so that a student’s grade doesn’t only rely on a few high-stakes exams. Examples include oral presentations, creative assignments, critical essays, and more.
* Teach students how to take multiple choice assessments effectively. Consider covering test-taking techniques in class, which can be an important skill for career paths that require exam certifications.

**How could I make a paper assignment more equitable?**

* Give students options in topic selection.
* Encourage them to use their own knowledge and experiences in their writing.
* Provide students with a rubric *before* they turn the paper in and explain to them how you will use the rubric and what your expectations are. Build in class time for questions and discussions of the rubric.
* Do not penalize students for non- standard grammar. Focus on the ideas.
* Provide students with models.
* Give opportunities to revise based on meaningful feedback.
* Avoid “none (or) all of the above” answers.
* Reduce the number of choices. Fewer choices (3) is shown to have the same validity and reliability as more (4-5).
* Consider allowing students to substitute their final exam grade for their midterm grade, or a similar system that rewards student improvement over the course.
* Get student feedback on exams. What confused them, what questions did they not feel prepared to answer? Incorporate that feedback into your teaching and exam- writing.