CREATING CLEAR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

http://wac.gmu.edu/teaching/cca.html

The construction of a well-thought-out assignment is the foundation of a productive writing/learning experience in any course. Teacher expectations in an assignment should be stated clearly enough that class discussion of an assignment can specify the criteria on which the ultimate writing product will be judged. These criteria also enable teacher and peers to provide more direct helpful formative response in the development of a piece of writing. Because the purpose of a written assignment is to inform students of teacher expectation, the teacher needs to present these expectations as explicitly as possible.

An assignment should address these issues:

- Purpose--what should the writer attempt to accomplish? Use as much detail as necessary to clarify. Pay special attention to the action words
- Audience--what reader is being addressed in the paper? the teacher? how knowledgeable is this reader? does this reader have a particular bias that the student needs to know about?
- Process--is the project being written in stages? (If so, describe them.) Is the student to write a draft, which will be revised with feedback? If so, how do the criteria for the draft differ from those of the final version? Format--number of words, typed, documentation style, headings; expectations of grammatical/mechanical correctness.

Like any other writing, assignments can be improved through revision based on feedback from readers. Hence, presenting our assignments to students and asking for their questions and for what they need clarified will improve assignments. Dialoguing with students to improve our assignments lets us practice what we preach about the value of asking for feedback and then revising.

What Does the Professor Want?

- **Analyze:** Analysis involves characterizing the whole, identifying the parts and showing how the parts relate to each other to make the whole. In analysis, a whole is broken down into its parts, for example, a theory into its components, a process into its stages, an event into its causes.
- **Assess/Criticize/Evaluate:** Determine the importance or value of something. Assessing requires you to develop clearly stated criteria of judgment and to comment on the elements that meet or fail to meet those criteria.
- **Classify:** Sort something into main categories and thereby pigeonhole its parts.
- **Compare/Contrast:** Identify the important similarities and differences between two elements in order to reveal something significant about them. Emphasize similarities if the command is to compare and differences if it is to contrast.
- **Define/Identify:** Give the special characteristics by which a concept, thing, event can be recognized, that is, what it is and what it is not. Place it in its general class and then differentiate it from other members of that class.
- **Describe:** Give an account of and present the characteristics by which an object, action, person, or concept can be recognized or an event or process can be recognized.
- **Discuss/Examine:** You are given room to analyze and/or evaluate a particular topic. You must decide on your own questions concerning the things to be discussed. You are expected to go beyond summary.
- **Explain/Justify:** Make clear the reasons for or the basic principles of something; make it intelligible. Explanation may involve relating the unfamiliar to the more familiar.
- **List/Enumerate:** Give essential points one by one in a logical order.
- **Interpret/Explain:** Write about what the author or a quotation means (not what you mean).
- **Illustrate:** Use a concrete example to explain or clarify the essential attributes of a problem or concept.
- **Outline/Trace/Review/State:** Organize a description under main points and subordinate points, omitting minor details and stressing the classification of the elements of the problem or the main points in the development of an event or issue.
- **Prove/Validate:** Establish that something is true by citing factual evidence and/or giving clear logical reasons for believing in the truth of something.