## Designing Assignments in Manageable Stages

### Variables in designing an assignment:

- **Pedagogical justification**—What’s the student going to get out of the assignment? How’s the assignment connected with concepts in the course? What specific content material will the student have to know and apply?

- **Purpose**—What function will the assignment serve? e.g. is it meant to convey information, argue a point, describe a procedure, diagnose a problem, make a recommendation, or some combination of functions?

- **Audience**—Who is the “ideal” reader for the audience? Someone in a real-life situation? Teacher, as the examiner? Other students who will benefit from the writer’s findings? A fictional but likely reader?

- **Writer’s Role**—How is the student supposed to present herself? As someone being examined? As a character in a potential, real-life writing situation? As a peer? As someone with some level of expertise or authority?

- **Format**—What are the expectations as to word count, genre (e.g. executive summary, article review), grammar, documentation, medium (e.g. web page, accompanying media, supplements to text such as graphs, text only)?

- **Criteria for Success**—What specific criteria will the student need to meet, based on the above variables?

### Multi-staging Assignments

Breaking an assignment into stages makes it more manageable for you and less overwhelming for students. You can try several possibilities.

After handing out an assignment, you might want to ask students to use the parts of a specific format (e.g. an executive summary) to make an **outline**. Students can select their topic and explain how they think they will develop each heading or section of the format.

If you require students to use **sources**, you can ask them to come to class with one they intend to use, along with a justification of why they think the source is appropriate. You can ask them to write a paragraph, showing how they might incorporate the source in their writing. Choose two or three students to read aloud what they’ve done. You can make suggestions. Or collect the work and turn the best one into an overhead or handout.

You might ask students to do an **audience analysis**. To give them a better sense of audience, you could even ask students to interview someone who would ordinarily read the kind of writing you’ve assigned.

Try turning one of your assignment’s criteria or sections into a **shorter piece**—for instance, students could come to class with two kinds of introduction paragraphs, or a diagnosis of a problem, or a list of possible recommendations. Again, you can briefly respond in class to a few—or select examples to illustrate what you’re seeking. Students can synthesize these pieces into the longer project.

### Give it a Try: Workshop and Interaction

**TO BEGIN:** Take five minutes to sketch out a writing assignment you typically do, or **could ask students to do**. Briefly analyze the assignment according to the variables listed in the left column. How explicit do you usually make each variable? How do you usually present the assignment to students? To what extent do you encourage—even “build in”—drafting, feedback, and revision?

**TO APPLY:** Look back over the sketch of the writing assignment you made. What revisions would you make in that assignment, based on the conversation we’ve had? What are some of the techniques your colleagues use, that you’d be willing to try? What innovations wouldn’t you make—and why?

**Source:** Howard & Jamieson, *Bedford Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines*, Bedford/St. Martin’s.