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“Does That Make Sense?” The Importance of Clear Assignment Instructions and Rubrics

by Carly Schaelling

Abstract:

Students often struggle to understand the expectations of their teachers when completing writing assignments. Teachers often feel frustrated when students seem to understand what they are asking, only to grade papers and see that the gap between their assignment tasks and students' performance is larger than expected. As a Writing Center tutor and first year graduate instructor for English 1010, I have had experiences that have helped me appreciate the importance of having clear written assignment instructions as well as detailed rubrics. Having these two elements incorporated with assignments can help students focus more on their writing tasks and less on guessing what their teacher expects of them. It is difficult as teachers to remember what it's like to not know something we have already learned and mastered. Being aware of this difficulty is important for teachers to be successful, especially when it comes to writing assignments.

Keywords: rubrics, assignment descriptions, tasks, task representation, expectation, writing, teaching, writing center

“Does That Make Sense?” The Importance of Clear Assignment Instructions and Rubrics

Tutoring students in the Writing Center has opened my eyes as an English 1010 instructor to the importance of having clear assignment instructions and detailed rubrics for my students. As a graduate instructor, I have often found myself struggling to make assignments clear to my students. I have felt like my students have understood instructions in class, only to realize many of them struggled with these expectations as I graded their papers. It is easy for me to recall times in class when I felt I had clearly explained assignment tasks to my students. I would ask my students if they had questions, answer the few they hand if any, and often conclude with "does that makes sense?" This final question was always met with blank nods. However, it has become obvious on occasion during a grading session that although I felt understood in my expectations for an assignment, and assured by many a nodding head from my students, the majority of my students were unclear on what was required. Even something so simple as how the assignment should be turned in, be it online or as a hard copy, can cause major problems if these requirements are not made clear to students. This is a frustrating situation many teachers find themselves in—because students don't know what tasks they are being expected to perform, it inhibits their ability to fulfill assignment requirements well.

While tutoring in the Writing Center, I had one student come in for a session about an art analysis paper. She was concerned about meeting her professor's requirements for the paper, and expressed she was unsure of what was being expected of her. We pulled up the assignment description to read it through together. We both struggled to nail down specifics for the paper. There were only a few sentences about the content of the essay, followed by a rubric with one or two words per section. This student had also yet to receive any papers or feedback back from this

professor, which made her a little nervous. I could feel this student's stress about the situation. How could she write an effective research paper with only a few lines of description and a very sparse rubric? As a tutor, I realized I could only give her some general advice about how to structure a research analysis, and hardly any advice about the actual art analysis. I am unfamiliar with the conventions of art analysis, and having a sparse rubric and assignment description didn't help me soothe this student's concerns. I encouraged her to talk with her professor during office hours and have specific questions about the paper.

This experience helped me understand better the student's point of view when it comes to writing an important long assignment. If students don't have a clear idea in mind of what a task, or assignment, looks like when completed, then they will spend more time worrying about what to do rather than how to do it. Lack of task representation is one of largest reasons for failure in writing performance (Plakans, 187). Clear instructions taught in class are obviously important, but if students don't have written detailed descriptions or rubrics available to them, the students who did not write everything down in class when instructions were given will have a difficult time succeeding.

As a teacher, it is difficult to know when students are understanding concepts or instructions for an assignment. Steven Pinker's idea, which he calls "the curse of knowledge," is the inability to remember what it is like to not know something once we know it (Pinker). As a 1010 instructor, I have forgotten what it's like to read 1010 material and be struggling to figure out the meaning. I had one professor point out to me that 1010 students reading what graduate students or professors would find very easy material to understand and synthesize is equivalent to my reading of high theory for a graduate class. This resonated with me, because I have seen similar expressions of frustration with readings among my students that I feel with my graduate

class readings. In both of these cases, it is important for teachers to try and remember what it's like not to know the concepts they do, and do their best to make clear to their students what is being discussed and assigned. For example, while it may seem like almost second nature for me to write a research analysis at this point, many of my students have no context for an assignment like this, and will find it very daunting. It would be helpful if I could try and remember what it was like to write my first research analysis, and how unsure I was about the task. Writing clear and detailed assignment descriptions is one way to mitigate some of the nervousness students face when writing an assignment that is totally new to them.

A final experience in the Writing Center reiterated the importance of assignment descriptions and rubrics to me. I had a student come in for help brainstorming research questions for a paper. As we looked over the rubric together, we both struggled to understand what was being asked for this paper. Thankfully, with a background in English, I was able to help her with ideas for a basic structure of English research papers. We discussed her topic and thought of multiple research questions. I talked to her about general outline ideas for a research paper she could try. This student also had yet to receive a paper graded back from her professor, and was worried about the ambiguous language of the rubric and description for the assignment. I felt more helpful than I had with my experience with the art analysis student, because of the conventional knowledge I have of English, but I still felt stunted in my ability to help this student with her paper.

Writing is a difficult process for students and teachers alike. Teachers are tasked with creating assignments to help students learn and explore their writing abilities. When teachers provide students with detailed assignment descriptions and rubrics, students can spend more time on writing content and less time wondering what is being expected of them. This is a realization I

would not have been able to see so clearly were it not for my experiences as a tutor in the Writing Center.