

Some Tips from Muriel Harris on Assignment Writing

*(prepared from notes taken during a Pearson Headwinds Webinar entitled
“How NOT to Write the Assignment from Hell,” April 2010)*

1. Think carefully about the assignment: what is its purpose? What are your goals for your students in having them write it? Is that clear to them?
2. What are your students’ goals for your class? Most want to learn practical skills. How does your assignment sheet and teaching of this unit address this expectation?
3. Understand your audience: who are your students? What is their background?
4. Students look for clues about what good writing is. These should come from your assignment and your in-class scaffolding that leads up to the completion of the assignment.
5. Test out your assignment; anticipate how your student audience might read/misread it. Ask: How is this assignment going to be interpreted by these students?
6. Effective assignments:
 - Have clear grading criteria (what is the teacher looking for?)
 - Are not intimidating (is the appearance of your assignment sheet overwhelming? Never underestimate the value of white space, margins, and legible fonts.)
 - Are free of cultural, political, or personal assumptions
 - Have a single, clear focus (avoid overloading students with questions & suggestions)
7. Provide models of student writing (which you should start to gather—with your students’ permission—from the first semester you teach all the way through to the last).

When asked to explain what she would consider “clear grading criteria,” Dr. Harris said:

- Pay attention to what is “fronted” or foregrounded on your assignment sheet. Front-load the handout with the task at hand.
- Deal with formatting or grammar aspects at the end of the assignment sheet
- If you want students to use an essay as a model, then go over it with them in class to make sure they understand what it is you want them to model.

NOTE: Muriel Harris (retired, Purdue) developed and directed the Writing Center at Purdue. The Purdue OWL was created under her leadership. She has seen many “Assignments from Hell” in her years of Writing Center work.