AAC&U VALUE ADD (Assignment Design and Diagnostic) Tool – Written Communication

A key finding from research resulting from AAC&U's VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) Project is that what faculty ask students to do in class assignments strongly affects how well they do it (Sullivan & McConnell, 2018). With that recognition in mind, this Assignment Design and Diagnostic Tool is intended to help you and your colleagues develop and/or revise an assignment designed to produce student work which develops and accurately demonstrates students' **written communication** abilities. When using this tool, the goal is to ensure that the *structure* and *expectations* of your assignment *align* with the outcomes you are trying to achieve.

Backward Design

This larger notion of instructional alignment is central to most instructional design models and is on display in the "backward design" method of planning pedagogical and assessment activities. Backward design (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012) suggests a three-stage process where you first determine the learning outcomes you aspire for your students. You then develop the assessments/assignments you will give your students; the learning artifacts produced by students in response to your assignment will provide you with evidence regarding how well your students have achieved the learning outcomes you defined. With learning outcomes and the associated assessments/assignments clearly defined, you would then move to engage in planning the teaching and learning experiences you will provide to enable your students to complete the assignment successfully and to the best of their ability.

Purpose

The purpose of AAC&U's VALUE ADD Tool series, developed with guidance from an international panel of experts, is to help you intentionally create clear and effective assignments designed to specifically evoke evidence of the learning outcomes you have identified for your students. In short, this tool will help you ensure your assignment aligns with your learning outcomes. That then also should guide your teaching as you help your students learn what they need to in order to complete the assignment. This VALUE ADD Tool is for those who have identified **written communication** as a learning outcome for their students, is aligned with AAC&U's Written Communication VALUE Rubric, and has three parts. Part one offers a "Cover Sheet" to enable you to reflect upon your students and your goals for them with this assignment. Part two encourages you to reflect upon structural elements of an effective assignment. Part three provides an opportunity to reflect upon the range of written communication tasks you may ask your students to perform in addition to how well they are articulated in the assignment itself. Please note that this VALUE ADD tool does not include guidelines for constructing and evaluating essay examinations; this tool is designed for writing to learn and writing assignments that align with authentically produced writing in which revision is expected even when only one submission is required.

How to Proceed

Your first step as you begin to use this tool is to reflect upon your assignment's instructional context and your students via the tool's "Cover Sheet" (Part One). As some assignments are intended to be broad or narrow in scope, the "Cover Sheet" provides an opportunity to articulate the parameters for the work you envision for your students. For a new writing assignment, you might use this tool to draft and refine your assignment, possibly using the elements in Part Two and Part Three as a checklist of items to consider as you craft your assignment. For existing writing assignments, you may choose to use this tool to reflect upon your own or a colleague's assignment, to discern opportunities for revision, or to affirm decisions you have made regarding the assignment. You may also find it helpful to have students provide you with feedback on an assignment by using this tool. When sharing an assignment with a colleague, it will be helpful if you complete and share the "Cover Sheet" in advance. Assignment design is an iterative process, and you may find yourself returning to this tool as you revise. A glossary is provided on the next page to clarify key terms used within the VALUE ADD Written Communication Tool.

Glossary

Audience – *The readers or reviewers of a text. Writing assignments typically have multiple audiences. The instructor is often thought of as a first audience, but other audiences might include the student themselves or peers in the class. In addition, writing assignments may include audiences beyond people in the class such as community partners or members of a profession or discipline.*

Context – *Circumstances informing or situating a text. The most immediate context for a writing assignment is internal: that of the course or classroom. Other contexts, less immediate but also important, inform the writing task; among them are current public events and specific issues, questions, or problems related to the topic or the discipline of the writing task, and/or questions that are important to the intended audience of the text being written.*

Disciplinary Conventions–*Specialized standards, expectations, and guidelines for writing within a field of study. Disciplinary conventions include format, content, organization, presentation, language usage, citation, and style, gene choice, and formatting.*

Evaluation Criteria – *Refers to how you will be grading the student's work, including performance standards and expectations as well as how various elements of an assignment are weighted in the grading process.*

Genre – *Simply stated, a type or kind of writing: a resume is not an essay. Disciplines tend to be defined by their genres; one wouldn't write a lab report in an art history course. Because genres and their conventions (e.g., the logic and format of an IMRAD report; the format of a case study; the passive voice used in technical projects) are often invisible to students, it's important to specify which of the features of a given genre inform the writing assignment.*

Learning Outcomes – *Statements that describe the knowledge, skills, and/or abilities students should acquire and be able to demonstrate by the end of a particular assignment, class, course, or program of study.*

Reflection – *A practice of reviewing an experience or a text for purposes of meaning-making, improvement, or planning. In the context of writing assignments, reflection often refers to a short text, accompanying a final draft, wherein a student considers a limited number of questions about the text itself (e.g., what are the strengths of this project? What did you learn in writing this text?).*

Revision – *Derived from the Latin* revisere *which means "to revisit" or "to go back to see," revision is the process of re-seeing a text to consider content, organization, formatting, word choice, and mechanics, in light of the intended audience, purpose, or assignment criterion. The revision process is often facilitated by external feedback that can help the writer see and understand where and how a text is more or less successful in accomplishing its intent.*

Rhetorical Situation – *The purpose of a text, the audience, the content or material, the genre, and the medium.*

VALUE – *VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) is a campus-based assessment approach developed and led by AAC&U.*

VALUE Rubrics – *Tools developed by AAC&U to assess students' own authentic work, produced across students' diverse learning pathways, fields of study and institutions, to determine whether and how well students are meeting graduation level achievement in learning outcomes that both employers and faculty consider essential.*

Writing Process(es) – *A series of behaviors or activities that a writer undertakes during the creation of a text. A writer's writing process(es) are generally guided by the writing situation and the form or genre of the text, and often are non-sequential and recursive (e.g., writing a thesis statement, receiving peer feedback, and then revising).*

References

McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (2012). *Understanding by Design Framework*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Sullivan, D., & McConnell, K. D. (2018). It's the assignments – A ubiquitous and inexpensive strategy to significantly improve higher-order learning. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 50*(5), 16-23.

Part One - Cover Sheet

<u>Instructions</u>: This section is designed to enable you to reflect upon your students, their processes, and your goals for them with this writing assignment. You might use this page for individual planning, or you might use it to provide context for one or more colleagues from whom you are seeking feedback on your assignment.

What is the context of the assignment (when during the course will it be assigned and what learning outcomes does it address)? What goals will this writing assignment help your students achieve?

What is the rhetorical situation of this assignment? Specifically,

- Explain the purpose(s) of the assignment;
- Identify the genre of the assignment (e.g., lab report, case study, essay, etc.); and
- Who is the audience for this writing assignment (e.g., you [the instructor], other students, or an audience outside of the course)?

Describe the process you envision regarding assignment development. For example,

- Will you or student peers provide feedback on drafts? If so, describe your plan.
- Will students be working alone or on a team for this writing assignment?
- How may technologies, such as AI, be employed for this assignment?

What assumptions are you making regarding your students and their current knowledge, prior knowledge, and/or skills as they begin this assignment?

What does not need to be explicitly stated in this assignment, given that the assignment directions or purpose are already familiar to your students via other aspects of the course (e.g., they are the same for every written assignment) or the curriculum (syllabus, earlier instruction, previous assignments, etc.)?

As you reflect upon your assignment, check the written communication components below that you expect your students to perform as part of this assignment. These would also be things you would anticipate seeing in the final artifact produced by your students:

- Evoke the purpose of the assignment
- Compose for a specific audience
- Respond to the context provided within the assignment
- Engage in appropriate research processes (e.g., personal reflection, textual evidence, empirical data collection) to develop knowledge of the content domain
- Leverage appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to support the narrative purpose
- Employ organization, presentation, and formatting conventions as expected by a specific genre, style, and/or discipline
- Evaluate the quality of information / sources / data and make selections among possible sources
- Employ high quality, relevant, and credible content that aligns with the assignment's purpose
- Skillfully communicate meaning to readers with clarity and fluency
- Write reflecting a level appropriate to the audience and purpose of the assignment
- Construct sentences that follow rules of grammar and mechanics appropriate to the rhetorical situation

PART TWO – Assignment Design Elements

Well-designed written communication assignments typically address each of these structural elements.

STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS This assignment articulates/explains…	Not specified	Partially specified – incomplete or vague instructions	Clearly specified
Which course learning outcome(s) the writing assignment is intended to meet.			
Notes/Feedback:			
The rationale for using this writing assignment in this course, including how it enhances students' learning and develops their writing skills.			
Notes/Feedback:			
The specific requirements of the writing assignment, including number or words or pages, format, typed or handwritten, style, grammatical expectations, type / number of citations, style guide (e.g., MLA, APA), and percentage of final course grade.			
Notes/Feedback:			
The intended audience for which the student is writing.			
Notes/Feedback:			
How the assignment will be evaluated, including what criteria or rubric will be used to grade this assignment.			
Notes/Feedback:			
If the assignment is to be completed in stages and/or if drafts are to be submitted for feedback prior to final submission, including dates and timelines for these processes.			
Notes/Feedback:			

If students are able to revise the writing assignment once completed, and if so, how will the revision be graded.			
Notes/Feedback:			
How and if technologies, such as artificial intelligence, can be employed to assist in the writing process.			
Notes/Feedback:			
For Group Projects Only: The roles and expectations for each group member, how the group will be assessed, and what the consequences are for group members who do not fulfill their assigned roles, including how will this will be enforced.			
Notes/Feedback:			

PART THREE – Written Communication Elements

Well-designed written communication assignments will include some or all of these components; some components may not be relevant for every assignment (refer to the checklist in Part One and note the selections in the first column below). In addition, a well-designed written communication assignment (particularly one designed for advanced students) might deliberately exclude a component if the intention is to assess whether students can use or apply that component unprompted.

Intended? Yes / No	WRITTEN COMMUNICATION DIMENSIONS AND COMPONENTS	Not relevant	Not Present	Explicit but vague or unclear instructions	Explicit and clear instructions
	Context of and Purpose for Writing				
	Evoke the purpose of the assignment				
	Compose for a specific audience				
	Respond to the context provided within the assignment				
Notes/Feedback:					
	Content Development				
	Engage in appropriate research processes (e.g., personal reflection, textual evidence, empirical data collection) to develop knowledge of the content domain				
	Leverage appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to support the narrative purpose				
Notes/Feedback:					
	Genre and Disciplinary Conventions				
	Employ organization, presentation, and formatting conventions as expected by a specific genre, style, and/or discipline				
Notes/Feedback:					

	Sources and Evidence				
	Evaluate the quality of information / sources / data and make selections among possible sources				
	Employ high quality, relevant, and credible content that aligns with the assignment's purpose				

Notes/Feedback:

	Control of Syntax and Mechanics				
	Skillfully communicate meaning to readers with clarity and fluency				
	Write reflecting a level appropriate to the audience and purpose of the assignment				
	Construct sentences that follow rules of grammar and mechanics appropriate to the rhetorical situation				

Notes/Feedback: