

CQSD

CENTRE | QUALITY SUPPORT
FOR | & DEVELOPMENT



FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE ASSIGNMENT BRIEFS



ASSIGNMENT BRIEFS

An 'assignment brief'- defined here as a set of instructions for non-exam-based assessment tasks- plays a key role in ensuring the communication of assessment requirements and expectations is clear and explicit.

Creating well-designed and structured assignment briefs *and* providing opportunities for students to actively engage with the brief through dialogue with staff and peers is fundamental to student success. Together, these impact positively on student attainment and have been shown to:

- decrease students' assessment anxiety and increase their self-efficacy (Cousin & Cureton, 2012)
- foster a reduction in the ethnicity awarding gap at the module level (Campbell & Duke, 2023; Cureton et al., 2017).

This guidance aims to provide guiding principles for the design of assignment briefs and signpost practical strategies for building students' confidence in understanding assessment requirements. Individuals can use it when setting coursework; programme teams may use it to support effective communication and scaffolding of assessment expectations across a programme.

ASSIGNMENT BRIEF DESIGN

CORE ELEMENTS

University policy on 'the Arrangements for setting coursework' (Assessment Handbook, [Section 6.9.1](#)) sets out baseline expectations for information students should be provided with for each piece of coursework. This includes its **form, length, [assessment criteria](#), submission deadline, and the date for its return with feedback.**

We outline below what this could look like in practice together with additional elements you should consider making explicit in an assignment brief. This is based on effective practice across the sector and, in particular, **Gilbert and Maguire's (2014) [Assignment brief design guidelines](#)**. It aims to provide useful guidance for designing an assignment brief template for your context and is not intended to be a prescriptive list.

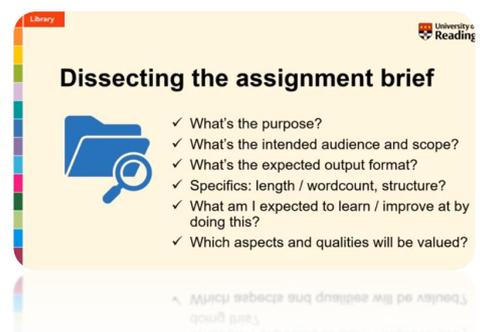
Preliminary Information

- **Module name and code**
- **Title:** There are many assignments called 'assignment 1' or 'essay'. Ensuring the assignment has a meaningful title specific to the task and using this consistently when referring to the assignment in the brief and module description avoids any potential confusion.
- **Task description:** Including a concise statement of the core task near the beginning of the brief will grab students' attention and provide a sharp focus for what comes next.
- **Assessment weighting** (i.e. percentage contribution towards module mark), **submission deadline and mode**, and **date for its return with feedback.**

The nature of the task

- **Purpose & Learning outcomes:** Providing a rationale for why the task has been selected, outlining the overarching aim and establishing connections to [learning outcomes](#) (i.e. the skills and

"Research has shown that clarity of instruction and assessment has a large, statistically significant, impact on student learning and motivation... The challenge of the assessment should not be in working out what they are being asked to do but in the intentional stretch on their disciplinary learning. Ambiguously worded assessments, unclear requirements or a lack of preparation can force students into surface learning strategies and increase anxiety." - Hughes, G., et al. (2022). [Education for Mental Health](#). Advance HE, p. 94-95.



A screenshot of the Study Advice video '[How to interpret my assignment brief](#)' which is aligned to this guidance. A link to the Study Advice Assessment guides is integrated into the Blackboard Ultra course template.

knowledge students are **expected to learn**) provides helpful context and makes the relevance of the task explicit. Linking to previous or future experiences can also signpost to where students can directly apply feedback from one assignment to another.

- **Intended audience:** Specifying the target audience, and where relevant, the student's role, is particularly important in [authentic assessment](#) contexts and clarifies the approach and tone students should take.
- **Scope:** Defining the boundaries of the assignment, including any specific themes, theories, or concepts to explore, along with detailing the required extent and type of research, offers students clear direction. This ensures a focused and purposeful approach to the task.
- **Format of the output:** Specifying the format of the output is important as we move towards more diverse and authentic assessment. Students and staff may not always have a shared understanding of the characteristics of various 'text types' e.g. students may be asked to write several 'reports' across a programme which may differ depending upon the learning outcomes, disciplinary context and the specific purpose and audience for the report. Considering how familiar students are with the format of the output has implications for the level of detail and scaffolding required.
- **Specifics:** Offering explicit instructions on formatting, structure (e.g. required subsections), length/word count (clarifying exclusions where applicable), and expectations for group work will contribute to greater clarity and, consequently, reduce the number of queries you receive. Where appropriate, it may also be helpful to indicate to students the notional learning hours associated with the task and/or a timeline for the various stages.
- **Top tips:** Offering guidance on what aspects and qualities of the assessment will be valued can help students understand the assessment criteria and focus their efforts. For example, the Henley Business School assignment brief template offers 'Three key pieces of advice based on the feedback given to the previous cohort who completed this assignment.'

Assessment criteria

You must ensure students know the criteria against which they will be marked. The University's generic criteria/grade descriptors (Assessment Handbook, [Section 10](#), Annexes 1 and 2) provide a useful starting point for designing [assessment criteria and rubrics](#) contextualised for your discipline, module, or assignment.

Referencing and Academic Integrity

Ensure clarity for students regarding the required referencing style and whether a reference list or bibliography is needed. Additionally, specify the relevant category concerning the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence Tools (GAIT) for the task.

Sources of Support

Provide contact information for any queries. Signpost opportunities to unpack the brief/FAQs in Blackboard and how formative assessment will prepare students well for summative assessment.

Working in partnership

Form partnerships with **colleagues:**

-using similar assessment types to prompt reflection on how assessment criteria and expectations are communicated and scaffolded to ensure continuity and progression across a programme.

-from outside your discipline to provide feedback on the accessibility of your brief.

Peer review: Ask for constructive feedback on your brief from peers as part of the '[Reflecting on Practice with colleagues](#)' process.

Students: Collaborate with students during the creation and review of briefs to ensure briefs are inclusive and accessible.

Rather than presenting a 'polished' assessment brief, are there opportunities in particular modules to work in partnership with students to negotiate certain aspects of the brief or task at the start of a module?

Explicit inexplicitness!

Emphasise the deliberate nature of any implicit elements in the brief to highlight where students are expected to act autonomously.



GAIT categories

- 1: GAIT cannot be used
- 2: GAIT can be used by students to support their learning and development
- 3: the use of GAIT is expected.

[GAIT Guidance for Staff](#)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In [Episode 22](#) of the 'Talking Learning and Teaching' podcast hosted by Merry (2023), Knight & Walsh outline 4 guiding principles (the 'Four C's') for the design of assignment briefs. The following table outlines these principles and associated areas for consideration, recognising this requires a challenging balancing act.

<p>Consistent</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location: Ensuring briefs are available in the designated location for assignment briefs in the Blackboard Ultra course template means students can easily find them. • Layout: Adopting a standardised template for briefs across a programme/Department/School removes the unnecessary barrier students face when confronted with different approaches to setting coursework. The resulting consistency reduces cognitive load, allowing students to direct their efforts towards engaging with the task. • Use of language: Maintaining consistent assessment and discipline-specific language avoids potential confusion.
<p>Clear</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility: Following University guidelines on creating accessible documents alongside tools such as Blackboard Ally increases the digital accessibility of briefs. This is essential for students who rely on assistive technologies and provides all students with autonomy to choose a format that works best for them. • Use of language: Using language appropriate to the level of study and writing in clear, plain English with concise sentences provides clarity. Avoid double negatives, idioms, Latin terms, or culturally specific references or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to students. Maintain a positive tone by avoiding emphatic language like DO NOT, you WILL, and you MUST. • Layout: Incorporating sub-headings and bullet points to break up text, and numbering or labelling subsections enhances readability. Logically sequencing the elements of the brief ensures students can focus on the information in a structured and efficient manner.
<p>Concise</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand-alone: Providing a concise document that contains pertinent assignment information rather than incorporating this within a larger module-level document such as a Module handbook ensures students can more easily locate the relevant information (Walsh, 2021). • Brief briefs: Aim to keep the overall brief as short as possible (2-3 pages) by minimising non-essential information. Put information that is applicable across all assignments (e.g., how to access marks and feedback, procedures in relation to over-length coursework, late penalties, extenuating circumstances, academic integrity and referencing conventions) in the designated location for standard assignment information in the Blackboard Ultra course template. This minimises duplication, enhances consistency, and directs students to relevant information without overloading the brief (Walsh, 2021). • Programme-level: With coordination across a programme team around the variety and continuity of assessment types you may be able to be more concise as students' assessment literacy and familiarity with the different types of task increases as they progress through their programme.
<p>Comprehensive</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous experience: Students familiarity with the type of the task and the level of study should determine the amount of information and support provided. • Colocation: Ensuring all assessment-related information, such as exemplars and recordings are co-located with the brief means students can easily find all the information they need in one place. • Overloading: While supplementary resources like handouts and screencasts can be beneficial, strike a balance to avoid unnecessary complexity stemming from an abundance of resources which student then need to reconcile.

ASSIGNMENT BRIEF DELIVERY

- Provide the assignment brief at the **beginning of a module** to give students advance notice of coursework requirements in line with university policy (Assessment Handbook, [Section 6.9.1](#)).
 - For substantial pieces of coursework (e.g. dissertations, capstone projects) advance notice should normally be given at the beginning of the Part or Session. This enables students to plan their time effectively.
- Make assignment briefs **central to the learning process** through **regular opportunities for dialogue** and **formative activities** so students can revisit assessment requirements and expectations throughout the module. This is particularly important in the early stages of the programme to support transition into higher education and/or when students encounter an unfamiliar task.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS

Given assessment standards are socially constructed it is important to actively foster dialogue centred around the brief among staff and students. This enables staff to better communicate their **tacit knowledge**, and students to develop a **shared understanding** of disciplinary requirements and expectations.

Student-centred dissemination of the brief is key: an overreliance on teacher-centred approaches (e.g., explaining the brief to students), however well meaning, could disempower and promote learned dependence. We outline below activities you can use or adapt in your teaching.

Interpreting assignment briefs

Students interpret the brief in small groups and anonymously submit any questions using post-it notes or polling tools. Address these questions in a plenary discussion. Co-create an assessment-related FAQs '[Conversation](#)' or '[Discussion](#)' in Blackboard, and check at regular intervals to address any emerging questions or misconceptions.

Unpacking the language of assessment

Students work in pairs, identifying and highlighting any assessment-related terminology or keywords they find challenging, such as verbs like synthesise. Then, engage in co-creating an assessment glossary.

Using exemplars

Students work in pairs to assess and comment on exemplar assignments using the assessment criteria. This familiarises students with the format of the output (e.g. structural and stylistic conventions) and develops students' understanding and internalisation of criteria, which they can then subsequently use to self-assess their own work.

Formative peer assessment

Students work in small groups to offer peer feedback on each other's work in progress, providing valuable formative feedback and developing their ability to self-assess their own work. Explore the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) 1,2,3 leaflet: '[Making peer feedback work in three easy steps](#)'.

"We had multiple Q&A sessions leading up to the deadline...when we got started we had one... and as we went along, we could ask questions and the lecturer would breakdown the assessment criteria and give us feedback on specific questions we had. Even though they couldn't give us specific advice for our own essays, it was still really helpful to listen to other people's questions and learn from that...that kind of level of **repeated checking in** was really helpful" – University of Reading student, 2021.

Interested in using exemplars in your teaching?

The following resources are highly recommended:

- Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) 1,2,3 leaflet: '[Improve your students' performance in 90 minutes!](#)'

- Heriot Watt's guidance on '[Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement](#)'

SUMMARY

Schools or departments aiming to enhance assessment practices and improve student success could benefit from evaluating how assessment requirements and expectations are communicated to students. If not already implemented, adopting a standardised template for assignment briefs across programmes and dedicating time within each module for meaningful dialogue among staff and students would be worthwhile considerations.

For more ideas for building students' confidence around assessment requirements into your teaching explore the other Assessment & Feedback guides in our Focus On: series, please visit <https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources/assessment-and-feedback>



References and further reading

- Campbell, P., & Duke, B. (2023). An evaluation of the racially inclusive practice in assessment guidance intervention on students' and staffs' experiences of assessment in HE: A multi-university case study. University of Leicester. Report. <https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.23579565.v1>
- Cousin, G., & Cureton, D. (2012). Disparities in student attainment. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disparities-student-attainment>
- Cureton, D., Groves, M., Day, P., & Williams, C. (2017). Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change. Retrieved from <https://www.phf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/University-of-Wolverhampton-final.pdf>
- Gilbert, F., & Maguire, G. (2014). Assignment brief design guidelines: developing academic communication to enhance the student experience in assessment. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from: <http://assignmentbriefdesign.weebly.com/>
- Merry, K. (2023). Episode 22: Assessment briefs with John Knight & Elaine Walsh. *Talking Learning and Teaching* (podcast). Retrieved from <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/kevin-merry/episodes/Episode-22-Assessment-Briefs-with-John-Knight--Elaine-Walsh-e295app/a-aabc5n9>
- Walsh, E. (2021). Effectively communicating the written aAssignment brief: comprehensiveness and conciseness. *European Conference on e-Learning*; ECEL (pp. 528-535). Retrieved from: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2616893796>

Published 2024. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

