

A SHORT GUIDE TO COURSE DESIGN

Prepared by the Office of Liberal Studies, Florida State University

A well-designed course can create learning experiences for students that will allow instructors to have lasting positive impacts on their students.

A well-designed course will have three broad components that align with each other to create a well-integrated whole:

1. clear learning goals stated as objectives/outcomes;
2. effective assessments; and
3. teaching and learning activities to support these.

An effective way to create a course that effectively integrates these components is to adopt a *backward design* process. With a backward design strategy, the instructor begins by considering what the end result of the entire learning process will be. These are the *learning goals* of the course. Without establishing clear learning goals to work towards, it is difficult to construct a coherent, purposeful course that will enable students to achieve something meaningful.

Once these objectives have been defined, instructors must ask themselves, how will I know if students have met these goals? This is a question of *assessment*—what will students do to provide evidence that they have met these objectives, and how will instructors evaluate students' performance as satisfactory or not? These assessments serve as the essential basis for grading in the course, but more importantly, they provide the students with invaluable feedback on their progress toward the learning goals.

The last stage is to work out the details of the *teaching and learning activities* that will happen during the course that will enable students to succeed on the assessments. These activities can include lectures and readings, but they should also include activities that invite the students to actively engage with and experience the course content.

A disconnect between any two of these will undermine the effectiveness of the course and lead to a less-than-optimal experience for students and instructors alike. But when these components are aligned and in harmony with the broader context of the course's position within the entire curriculum and university environment, the structure of the course itself will help facilitate a high-quality and rewarding educational experience.

I. Learning Goals

The place to begin is by determining the essential learning goals for the course. It may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What do you want your students to know?
- What do you want your students to care or think about?
- What do you want your students to be able to do as a result of their learning in the course?

- What goals might the students themselves have?
- What does the department expect as well?
- What is expected from the Liberal Studies program?

Having a clear picture of your core learning goals can help you to establish the ultimate outcomes you envision for students who complete your course.

These goals can be sketched out by going through three successive phases of development:

1. Considering the broader situational context of the course and the students;
2. Formulating underlying goals for the course that will lead to a significant learning experience for the students; and
3. Articulating these goals as clear learning objectives that will guide the teaching and assessment.

Situational Context

Before determining the learning goals for a course, take stock of the context in which the course will be taught. Consider such things as:

- Who will these students be, why are they taking *this* course, and what are *their* goals and expectations?
- Where will this course fit within the students' overall university experience? What courses will the students have already taken, and for what subsequent courses should this one prepare them?
- What existing knowledge, misconceptions, skills, weaknesses, and expectations will they bring with them?
- What are the expectations on this course as determined by the university, department, discipline, or society?
- What will the size of the classes be, and in what physical spaces will the learning take place?

Obviously, instructors have very little control over these and other situational factors, but these factors *will* shape the reality of the course experience for both students and instructors. It is critical to take these into account when establishing the goals and designing the course.

Goals for Significant Learning

Once you have analyzed the broader context in which the course will exist, decide what students should take out of the course. This is a much bigger question than simply defining the *content* of the course by listing topics. Faculty members and instructors are professional experts in disciplinary content, but it is helpful to keep in mind that we are teaching *students*, not topics. L. Dee Fink (2013; 2007) describes six dimensions to learning that intersect and interact to create a “significant learning” experience, the sort that can continue to impact students for years after the course has concluded.¹ Fink proposes a taxonomy that outlines six major types of learning:

¹ L. Dee Fink, “A Self-Directed Guide to Designing Courses for Significant Learning,” available at <https://www.deefinkandassociates.com/GuidetoCourseDesignAug05.pdf>

- **Foundational knowledge:** information and concepts to be understood and remembered, key perspectives or ideas to be carried forward, etc.;
- **Application:** the skills students should gain from the course, the types of critical, creative, and practical thinking they should develop, etc.;
- **Integration:** the connections students must forge among ideas within the course, between the course content and the content of other course, to the students' own personal and professional lives, etc.;
- **Human dimensions:** what should students learn about themselves, about others, about interacting with others, etc.;
- **Caring:** the changes in values, interests, feelings, etc. that students will adapt; and
- **Learning how to learn:** how to succeed as a student in the course or university, as a student in the discipline, as an independent, lifelong learner.

The foundational knowledge category is the obvious place to begin when designing a course. Fink (2013) asserts it is helpful to remind ourselves that what we normally consider the actual “content” of a course—the core knowledge and its applications—in reality comprises only two of the six dimensions in which we should be engaging our students. As Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) state in *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips*,

the overall course objectives involve *educating students*; the objective of a course is not just to cover a certain set of topics, but rather to *facilitate student learning and thinking in general*. ... We are concerned about helping our students in a lifelong learning process; we want them to develop interest in further learning and have a base of concepts and skills that will facilitate further learning, thinking, and appreciation. Thus, in framing your goals, think about what will be meaningful to your students both now and in the future. (p. 8)

Goals for your course should move beyond a list of topics you plan to cover. They should reflect what you hope students will leave your class with and use in the future and what the university expects for student learning in Liberal Studies. The ideal for a Liberal Studies course is nothing less than to offer students a transformative educational experience.

Using the concept of significant learning, here is an example of general course goals for a hypothetical geography course formulated in terms of significant learning categories²:

- **Foundational Knowledge:** Understand major geographic concepts – physical geography, human geography, scale, demographic transition, and so on.
- **Application:** Be able to find information on and analyze regional problems from a geographic perspective.
- **Integration:** Identify the interactions between geography and other realms of knowledge such as history, politics, economics, social structure, and so on.
- **Human Dimension:** Be able to intelligently discuss world events with other people and the impact of geography on these events.
- **Caring:** Be interested in other places of the world and want to continue learning about those places via reading, TV, the Internet, and travel.

² From L. Dee Fink’s “Creating Significant Learning Experiences” (2013).

- **Learning How to Learn:** Be able to interpret the geographic significance of new information and ideas acquired in the future.

Learning Objectives

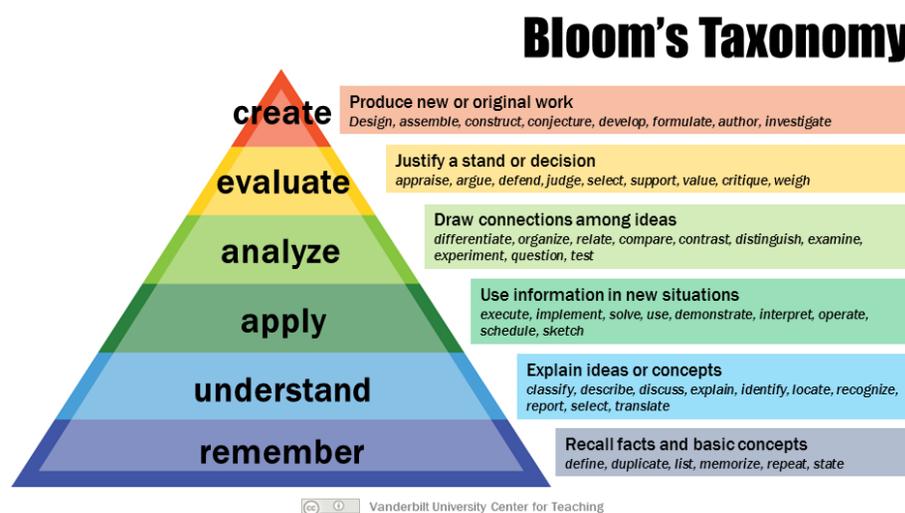
Once the overall course goals have come into focus, these can be expressed as clear learning objectives that state what the students should be able to *do* at the end of a course that they could not do before. Learning objectives outline *intended* results of student engagement in instruction, activities, and assessments. They should be student-focused (rather than content-focused) and oriented towards specific *observable* behaviors that students will be expected to perform.

Well-written learning objectives should:

1. Contain an action verb that refers to the cognitive process that students will use;
2. Include an object that describes the knowledge that the students will acquire or construct; and
3. Be stated so that the outcome can be measured (ideally by more than one course assessment).

Learning objectives operationalize the overarching learning goals of the course. Therefore, it is best to express learning objectives using action-oriented verbs such as those described in Bloom’s taxonomy (see Figure 1).³ For example, rather than saying “students will understand such and such,” say instead, “students will be able to *do* something [because they will understand such and such].” Using the taxonomy as a reference at this stage of course development can also ensure that the objectives will engage higher-order cognitive processes (*create, evaluate*) rather than remaining stuck at as the foundational levels of *remember* and *understand*. These learning objectives will serve as the pillars that guide the teaching and assessment for the entire course and will take you into the realm of crafting a significant learning experience for your students rather than merely providing them with intellectual content.

Figure 1. Bloom’s Taxonomy (revised)



³ See <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>.

Incorporating Liberal Studies Student Learning Objectives into Your Course

All Liberal Studies courses must include the required Liberal Studies learning objectives. As with all learning objectives, each of these objectives should also be measurable by course assessments. General Education learning objectives for each area are provided in section 2 beginning on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, and University-wide Graduation Requirements are described in section 3 beginning on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The Liberal Studies student learning objectives are written broadly so they can relate to many kinds of courses taught in many different disciplines, and students will take different courses as they make the journey through Liberal Studies into their major. It is important to consider how *your* course goals and learning objectives fit together with the Liberal Studies goals and learning objectives. No individual course can fulfill every aspect of the student learning objectives, but all should help students move toward achieving the goals inherent in the student learning objectives. We suggest thinking about your specific course goals and the Liberal Studies student learning objectives together as an integrated whole rather than an addition to an already-completed course. You are even encouraged to reword (within reason) the Liberal Studies student learning objectives to “contextualize and give greater meaning and clarification”⁴ to how the Liberal Studies goals play out in your specific course.

Hanstedt (2018) gives a great example of how instructors can move from institutional and departmental goals to a specific course goals that integrate ideas from both, and provides a starting point for measuring student learning on that objective. Hanstedt recommends the following steps to integrate institutional/departmental and course-specific student learning objectives (adapted for Liberal Studies at FSU):

1. Take a moment to look at the Liberal Studies competency and student learning objectives appropriate for your course.
2. Identify which of the goals that you have already created for your own course naturally align with the Liberal Studies learning objectives. Keep this alignment in mind as you flesh out the rest of our course and assessments.
3. For any Liberal Studies learning objectives that are *not* yet being met through your own course goals and student learning objectives, draft a few additional course goals to support these learning objectives, doing your best to meet the following standards:
 - a. Require students to actively engage in course content that helps them move toward mastering the Liberal Studies goals within the context of your course and discipline;
 - b. Provide measurable evidence they’ve done so through course assessments; and
 - c. Work with students on a level that fulfills your greatest hopes for them.

⁴ From Paul Hanstedt’s book *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*, p.36.

II. Assessment and Feedback

Once quality learning objectives have been designed, it is helpful to answer the following question: What kinds of *feedback and assessment* should I provide? When designing assessments, it may be helpful to consider the following questions with respect to the situational context of the class and your learning objectives:

- What do students need to do in this course to show they have met the learning objectives?
- What kinds of assignments would best help students show what they are able to do after with what they have learned?
- Given the situational context (duration of the course, size of the class, instructional support, available technology, etc.), what is realistic so I can provide timely feedback?
- What kind of assignments will help students be successful in the future (after they leave the class)?

Broadly speaking, an assessment is any assignment or activity that provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate achievement of a learning objective. Assessments are evaluated by the instructor or TA (or perhaps electronically), typically but not necessarily for a grade. Ultimately, assessments in one form or another determine a student's final grade for a course, but they are about more than just grading. They also provide students with essential formative feedback intended to help them improve their performance and accelerate their learning.

Forward- and Backward-Looking Assessments

It can be helpful to think of assessments as either forward-looking or backward-looking. Backward-looking assessments audit student learning, typically to serve as the basis for the students' final grades. Forward-looking assessments, on the other hand, are concerned with helping students learn better and continue developing. As Fink (2013) puts it,

Teachers using backward-looking assessment look back on what has been covered ... and in essence say to the students, "We have covered topics x, y, and z. Did you get it?" In forward-looking assessment, teachers look ahead to what they expect or want students to be able to *do* in the future as the result of having learned about x, y, and z. The relevant question then becomes, "Imagine yourself in a situation when people are actually using this knowledge. Can you use your knowledge of x, y, and z to do [this]?" (p. 95)

Forward-looking, educative assessments replicate real-world situations in which the student's knowledge and abilities will be put to the test. They have the students negotiate a complex task, asking them to *do* the subject rather than recite knowledge about it. The more an assessment can be situated within an authentic context, the more meaningful and impactful it will be to students.

Assessments, both forward-looking and backward-looking, take many forms—exams, papers, assignments, projects, discussions, etc.—but effective assessments should be constructed around two underlying principles:

1. Assessments should be tied directly to the learning objectives for the course; and
2. Assessments should be used to provide feedback to students, telling them how they are doing and letting them know where and how to improve.

High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Assessments

When designing assessments, we often think about those that are designed for grading purposes, typically with significant implications for the final course grade. These “high-stakes” assessments of student learning are focused on a product that provides measurable evidence of student learning. They are summative in nature and help students demonstrate the concepts and skills they have learned in a course.

“Low-stakes” assessments are forms of evaluation that do not impact students’ grades heavily or at all. These types of assessments are formative in nature, helping students understand how they are doing with course material and giving them an opportunity to “try out” their new knowledge or skills without a huge effect on their course grade. They can give students permission to experiment, explore, take risks, and make mistakes. These performance evaluations help students understand what they are doing well, and where they can improve. They are particularly helpful early in the semester and as instructional “scaffolding” that “help students bridge the gap between their current levels of knowledge or skill and the knowledge or skill levels we want them to attain.”⁵ Possible examples include:

- Quizzes given at the end of a class period or week, perhaps using interactive response systems during class
- In-class problem solving, individually or as a group
- Responses to readings or summaries focused on analyzing course materials
- Short writing assignments in response to a prompt or a discussion question
- Journaling for reflection about the course and concepts, as well as one’s own learning process
- Early stages of a larger high-stakes assignments: abstracts, proposals, outlines, annotated bibliographies, drafts, etc.

Aligning Learning Objectives and Assessments

Assessments should be tied directly to the learning objectives for the course. Naturally, not every assessment will engage every learning objective; however, each student learning objective should be assessed (with or without a grade) more than once in a given course. Assessing objectives multiple times reinforces student learning by providing them with multiple opportunities to use foundational knowledge, and also by allowing them to exhibit growth over the course of a semester.

It may be helpful to use a hierarchical matrix to plan which assessments will measure which learning objectives and to ensure you are planning assessments for each course-specific and Liberal Studies student learning objective.

The matrix you create should be specific to your course goals, learning objectives, and related assessments. Figure two shows an example from IDS 2371, Music and Culture

⁵ <https://teaching.fsu.edu/tips/2018/01/19/scaffolds-learning-not-just-construction-sites/>

in London.⁶ A blank version of this matrix is available in Appendix A for your adaptation and use.

Feedback

Providing feedback is one of the most important aspects of teaching. It tells students how they are doing, and it lets them know where, and critically, *how*, to improve. Student-centered teaching involves feedback that is regular, timely, based on appropriate criteria/standard, and substantive. It should also be delivered with care for students' on-going academic and personal development. Grades by themselves can tell students how they are doing, but in order to provide support for success in the course and encourage future learning, instructors should provide students with further evaluation of their work and formative feedback.⁷

Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2005) developed a model and principles for good feedback practice that can be adapted into prior planning for any course. Good feedback practice:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;
4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; and
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.⁸

⁶ Adapted from Dr. Michael Buchler's IDS 2371 Music and Culture in London. Syllabus available at <http://liberalstudies.fsu.edu/documents/IDS2371.pdf>.

⁷ From L. Dee Fink's *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, 2013.

⁸ From Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick's *Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice*, 2005.

Figure 2. *Aligning Your Goals, Learning Objectives, and Assessments*

Course Goals (broad and general)	Student Learning Objectives (specific and assessable—what students will be able to do reflecting the course goal)	Assessments (how students will demonstrate achievement of each learning objective)
<p>1. Help students become competent analytical and flexible thinkers and lifelong learners. (Liberal Studies E-Series course goal)</p>	<p>1. Analyze the major questions or problems in the course using various intellectual perspectives.</p>	<p>The final paper will assess students on their abilities to research and articulate aspects of national identity and culture. 50% of the paper grade is allocated to quality and content of the argument.</p> <p>In-class discussions will investigate such questions as, how do the arts reflect cultural identity and political thought? What are some ways that the arts can advocate for or reflect social change? What, if any, questions can artists pose or answer that historians and journalists cannot?</p>
	<p>2. Demonstrate the relevance of ideas or findings from the course.</p>	<p>Students will give presentations on sites of historical and cultural significance to be visited.</p> <p>Journal assignments will have students chronicle their experiences in daily entries that discuss what they have seen and contextualize it within the course’s intellectual framework.</p>
	<p>3. Communicate arguments central to the course using clear, coherent prose that utilizes the conventions of standard American English.</p>	<p>Journal assignments (see above).</p> <p>Final paper, in which 30% of the grade is allocated for “clarity of writing and coherence of narrative.”</p>
	<p>4. Discuss relevant ideas from the course using sources from a variety of text types.</p>	<p>Final research paper requires students to integrate printed, audio, video, and online sources into their work (20% of paper grade).</p>
<p>2. Help students become thoughtful patrons of and participants in cultural practices. (Liberal Studies Humanities and Cultural Practice course goal)</p>	<p>1. Interpret intellectual or artistic works within a cultural context.</p>	<p>Student presentations on cultural sites engage notions of art and architecture within the cultural context.</p> <p>A second student presentation requires students to analytically engage a piece of music.</p>
	<p>2. Use a cultural, artistic, or philosophical approach to analyze some aspect of human experience.</p>	<p>Short assignments on aspects of British culture (food, vocabulary, and history) will engage students in cultural examination of human experience.</p> <p>In-class discussions will focus on this question writ large. The resulting participating and attendance grades will reflect this.</p> <p>Students’ journals will function as a cultural and artistic analysis of their own experiences.</p>

In a review of research on feedback and student performance, Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) suggest feedback should be:

- Understandable: Expressed in language that students will understand.
- Selective: Commenting on two or three things that the student can do something about.
- Specific: Pointing to examples in the student's submission where the feedback applies.
- Timely: Provided in time to inform the next piece of work.
- Contextualized: Framed with reference to the learning objectives and assessment criteria.
- Nonjudgmental: Descriptive rather than evaluative, focused on learning goals rather than the student's ability.
- Balanced: Pointing out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement.
- Forward-looking: Suggesting how students might improve subsequent assignments.
- Transferable: Focused on knowledge and skills students can use beyond the course, and self-regulatory abilities such as planning, monitoring one's work, motivation, and assessing one's work through reflection.⁹

Integrating assessments and feedback are key aspects of student-centered course design.

Reflection

Reflection—students engaging in self-assessment—is an important part of the formative feedback. Having students develop this skill is essential to their long-term success if they are to carry the lessons of the course with them once they are no longer under the direct care of their teacher. There are many ways to engage students in self-reflection. For example, you could ask students to evaluate their own work on similar standards you will use for grading. Alternatively, asking students to reflect on feedback they received on an assignment provides an opportunity for them to translate your feedback into their own plans for the future. Honest self-assessment helps them better analyze their effort and thinking, and these kinds of activities provide structured opportunities for self-reflection to help students better understand their performance. It can also be an opportunity to help them develop self-regulation skills (used to actively monitor one's goals, effort, strategies, and learning) that will help them master future assessments, or perhaps think more deeply about what they learned in the process of completing an assignment.

III. Designing Assessments, Grading Criteria, and Rubrics

Once you have chosen which kinds of assessments will best allow students to apply what they are learning in class and decided what strategies you will use for feedback, it is time to formulate the details. When designing assessments, they should include specific criteria and standards. The criteria should be clear and help students understand what is expected.

⁹ From Svinicki & McKeachie's *McKeachie's Teaching Tips*, 2014, pp.111–114.

Tests, Quizzes, and Exams

Many courses use tests, quizzes, and exams to elicit and measure student performance. Often students think of tests as simply an exercise in relaying memorized facts: the kind of backward-looking assessment with which they are most familiar. Important foundational knowledge may need to be tested in this way, as basics are often necessary to move forward in a course. However, questions can also be posed that test higher level thinking or be written to ask students to apply foundational knowledge to a real problem. Tests might include well-designed questions (problems, short-answer items, essay items) that elicit the performance articulated by the student learning objectives.¹⁰

Tests are most effective as assessments if broken up into smaller, frequent tests rather than just one or two major exams per semester. If your course must rely heavily on tests, try to give one or two in the first seven weeks of a course so students can build skills early and prepare for success over the course of the semester. This assists students in developing appropriate test-related study habits and has a positive effect on student achievement.¹¹

The following resources outline some promising practices in test or quiz design:

- Designing Better Quizzes: Ideas for Rethinking Your Quiz Practices: <https://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/educational-assessment-free-reports/designing-better-quizzes-ideas-for-rethinking-your-quiz-practices/>
- Designing multiple-choice questions: <https://www.edutopia.org/article/5-tips-designing-multiple-choice-quizzes>
- Designing online tests: http://www.clemson.edu/online/documents/best-practices/online_test

Essays and Written Assignments

Many courses at FSU are writing-intensive and focus specifically on developing students' writing skills, but courses across disciplines use written assignments to assess students' abilities to connect course concepts together, to encourage creativity, or to exhibit their ability to analyze and synthesize information. Here are a few tips on designing effective written assignments:

- Explain what you want students to do in the assignment. Use specific words like analyze, synthesize, critique, etc.
- Tell them who the audience is for the paper and what genre they should employ (e.g., a report, a review, an essay).
- Outline details: how long the paper should be, formatting and style guidelines, required use of outside sources, etc.
- Develop grading criteria and a rubric based on the specifics of the assignment as they relate to the course learning objectives.

¹⁰ Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) provide wonderful tips on designing tests (Ch. 8) in *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* and provide a list of supplemental reading on the subject.

¹¹ See Basol and Johanson's "Effectiveness of frequent testing over achievement: A meta-analysis" in the *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 2009.

- Set a due date, taking into account time for students to prepare through structured outlining, drafting, and/or peer review, your feedback on drafts, and how much time you will need grade the assignment. Ask yourself, is this doable and what resources do I need to give effective feedback and timely grades?
- Build in teaching activities to prepare students for success (e.g., brainstorming and mind mapping, gathering references, short writing assignments, peer review, etc.).

Designing Writing Assignments by Traci Gardner is a free, open text all about designing writing assignments. It may be particularly useful to those teaching writing-intensive courses.

Teaching a large course and worried about grading? Consider using these tips to design short answer questions or one-page assignments you can do in- or out-of-class and grade quickly.

Participation

Providing a clear, useful, and constructive evaluation for class participation is challenging for many instructors. Engaging your class in conversation about what active participation looks like—beyond just speaking often—can help you frame your expectations and help students understand them. Participation also includes preparation for class, participation in small-group and large-group activities, and active listening. Asking students to rate their individual effort early in the semester, and giving them feedback from your vantage point, can help them improve their participation in class and grade. This example rubric exhibits some of the criteria for participation an instructor might consider.¹² The rubric (Figure 3) could easily be adapted into a grading rubric by assigning letter grade or point values to the three levels of performance and percentage or point weights to each of the five criteria.

For online courses, participation is commonly tied to asynchronous discussion board activities, though some courses may have face-to-face meetings as part of participation. Setting ground rules for appropriate online communication and specific expectations for the course discussion, graded or ungraded, are both important. The example rubric (Figure 4) from the University of Delaware¹³ provides an example of how you can assess many aspects of participation in asynchronous discussion, not simply number of posts.¹⁴

¹² Adapted from a resource provided by Dr. Alysia Roehrig Bice, FSU, in *College Teaching*

¹³ Adapted from <https://www1.udel.edu/janet/MARC2006/rubric.html>

¹⁴ Adapted from <https://www1.udel.edu/janet/MARC2006/rubric.html>

Figure 3. Participation Rubric Example

Evaluative Dimension	Above Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Quality of Contributions	Contributions are relevant and routinely integrate course reading and life experiences into the discussion; discussions are supported through course content	Contributions lean more toward either course readings or life experiences, but are relevant to the conversation	Contributions are not relevant to the conversation and rarely incorporate course readings; contributions portray a lack of preparation for class
Significance of Contributions	Contributions add complexity to the conversation and support or build off of others' contributions	Contributions are generally substantive, but occasionally indicate a lack of attentions to what others have shared	Contributions repeat what others have shared and thus do not advance the conversation
General Engagement	Regularly contributes to class in both large and small group formats; routinely engaged with course activities and/or discussions	Contributions generally favor either the small or large group; does not consistently appear engaged in activities and/or discussions	Minimal to no contributions are offered in either the small or large group; appears disengaged from activities and/or discussions; addresses core issues in activities and/or discussions quickly and shifts to personal conversations or off-topic material
Gate-Keeping	Does not dominate the conversation; regularly encourages the participation of others by posing questions or asking for other students' thoughts	Student occasionally encourages the participation of others; recognizes the contributions of others	Either no minimal contributions or dominates the conversation; does not engage other students in conversation; directs majority of comments to the instructor
Listening/Attending Skills	Is considerate (verbally and nonverbally) of appropriately expressed feelings and opinions of others; actively listens to both peers and instructor; actively supports peers' learning processes	Generally considerate (verbally and nonverbally) of appropriately expressed feelings and opinions of others; typically displays active listening; generally supports peers' learning processes	Is dismissive (verbally and nonverbally) of others' feelings and opinions or does not actively listen; displays a lack of interest; does not actively support peers' learning process

Figure 4. Participation Rubric for Online, Asynchronous Discussions Example

Criteria	Unacceptable 0 Points	Acceptable 1 Point	Good 2 Points	Excellent 3 Points
Frequency	Participates not at all.	Participates 1-2 times on the same day.	Participates 3-4 times but postings not distributed throughout week.	Participates 4-5 times throughout the week.
Initial Assignment Posting	Posts no assignment.	Posts adequate assignment with superficial thought and preparation; doesn't address all aspects of the task.	Posts well developed assignment that addresses all aspects of the task; lacks full development of concepts.	Posts well developed assignment that fully addresses and develops all aspects of the task.
Follow-Up Postings	Posts no follow-up responses to others.	Posts shallow contribution to discussion (e.g., agrees or disagrees); does not enrich discussion.	Elaborates on an existing posting with further comment or observation.	Demonstrates analysis of others' posts; extends meaningful discussion by building on previous posts.
Content Contribution	Posts information that is off-topic, incorrect, or irrelevant to discussion.	Repeats but does not add substantive information to the discussion.	Posts information that is factually correct; lacks full development of concept or thought.	Posts factually correct, reflective and substantive contribution; advances discussion.

Grading Rubrics

Grading rubrics can be helpful tools for assessing student work and providing specific feedback. Developing rubrics takes time, but long as you have clear ideas of what you value in your students' work and what different levels of competence look like, you have the building blocks of an effective rubric. As Walvoord and Anderson posit in *Effective Grading*, well-designed assessments and their associated grading rubrics should provide (1) clear criteria for students and (2) a structure for grading and effective feedback.

For papers, projects, and presentations, rubrics can help with consistency in grading, especially if more than one instructor/TA is grading student work. When returning an assignment to students, providing them with a marked rubric (on hard copy or built into the course management site/Canvas) can help students understand where they earned points on the assignment and what areas have room for improvement. You may want to add an additional "feedback" field in a rubric for each criterion listed and the assignment overall, tying the grading on the rubric and your specific feedback together in one place.

To create a grading rubric, start by identifying criteria for the assessment: the "traits" on which you will evaluate student performance. These criteria should be based on observable, measurable student behaviors generally aligned with the learning objectives for the particular assessment and for the course as a whole. These evaluation criteria can also be worked into the description of the assessment you include in your syllabus.

Next, construct a scale for each criterion that expresses varying levels of student performance with respect to that criterion. These scales are usually three to five levels. For example, a typical rubric might have a scale where a level 5 indicates the student did an excellent job meeting expectations for that criterion, a 3 indicates some achievement of the expectations, and a 1 indicates the student failed to meet expectations for that criterion.

With this structure in place, create statements of expected performance at each level of the rubric specific to each criterion, and assign a number of points (or range of points) associated with the level. These descriptions will help students understand your expectations for their performance, and they help you consistently evaluate their work in regard to those expectations. The points earned per level could be consistent for every trait on the rubric, or the number of points possible per trait could vary depending on how you prioritize and weight the different criteria for your assignment.

The following example rubric (Figure 5) from an Ethics and E-Series course at FSU, *Ethics through Art*,¹⁵ shows how a faculty member designed their grading criteria with both Liberal Studies and course-specific student learning objectives in mind, expressing the criteria with levels of student performance and associated points for grading.

There are wonderful examples of rubrics for different purposes available online that can be adapted for your course. Rubrics for writing assignments are most common, but you will also find rubrics for projects, class presentations, group work, peer assessments, student self-evaluations, and class participation.

¹⁵ Course designed by Dr. Angela Schwenkler at FSU. Full syllabus available at <http://liberalstudies.fsu.edu/documents/IFS3139.pdf>

Figure 5. Rubric Development Example: From Criteria to Levels

Rubric for Paper Assignments 1 and 2

Assignment: This course centers around three questions: Can art contain ethical content, in a way that uniquely furthers the philosophical investigation of ethics? Can some works of art help us develop ethical awareness? Does all art by its nature have ethical content, or can art be amoral? Students will write a paper of 1500 words which articulates an answer to one of these questions. In writing the paper, students will draw on the work of two of the philosophers read during that section of the course. 75% of the student's grade on the paper will be determined by their achievement of the E-series and Ethics competencies (rubric below), and 25% will be determined by their achievement on the Writing competency rubric.

Competency: High achievement	Excellent	Adequate	Inadequate	Poor	Point total for competency:
This paper answers the question at hand using the works of two philosophers whose views constitute two different positions about the relationship between ethics and art. (E-Series 1, Ethics 1)	Papers in this category pick appropriate philosophers with appropriately different views. (10 points)	Papers in this category might pick two philosophers whose views are not significantly different. (7.5 points)	Papers in this category might only discuss one philosopher. (5 points)	Papers in this category fail to discuss any philosopher in a meaningful way. (0-4 points)	/10
This paper effectively communicates the arguments of the first philosopher it discusses. (E-Series 3)	Papers in this category explain the argument in premise/conclusion form and assess at least one strength and one weakness. (18-20 points)	Papers in this category attempt to explain the argument in premise/conclusion form but make a mistake in presentation, or papers in this category fail to assess a strength and weakness of the argument. (11-17 points)	Papers in this category mention an argument but fail to explain it in premise/conclusion form, and fail to assess a strength and weakness. (5-10 points)	Papers in this category do not present an argument from the philosopher under discussion. (0-4 points)	/20

<p>This paper effectively communicates the arguments of the second philosopher it discusses. (E-Series 3)</p>	<p>Papers in this category explain the argument in premise/conclusion form and assess at least one strength and one weakness. (18-20 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category attempt to explain the argument in premise/ conclusion form but make a mistake in presentation, <i>or</i> papers in this category fail to assess a strength and weakness of the argument. (11-17 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category mention an argument but fail to explain it in premise/ conclusion form, and fail to assess a strength and weakness. (5-10 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category do not present an argument from the philosopher under discussion. (0-4 points)</p>	<p>/20</p>
<p>This paper incorporates an interpretation of at least one work of art in its answer to the question at hand. (E-Series 4)</p>	<p>Papers in this category <i>both</i> present the artwork in significant detail <i>and</i> explain its relevance to the question at hand.</p>	<p>Papers in this category either present the artwork in significant detail <i>or</i> explain its relevance to the question at hand, leaving this part of the paper with significant weaknesses.</p>	<p>Papers in this category mention an artwork, but without presenting it in much detail and without fully explaining its relevance.</p>	<p>Papers in this category either do not mention an artwork or do so in a very cursory manner.</p>	<p>/20</p>
<p>The paper displays awareness of the importance of historical, social, and cultural contexts by including in its interpretation of the work of art <i>or</i> its presentation of philosophical arguments at least a brief discussion of the historical, social, or cultural context of the work or arguments. (Ethics 2)</p>	<p>Papers in this category provide a 2-3 sentence discussion that explains the relevance if the historical, social, or cultural contexts of the text for the discussion of the paper. (5 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category provide a 1-3 sentence discussion of the historical, social, or cultural contexts of the text at hand, but their discussion is either too brief or seems irrelevant. (3-4 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category mention only in passing some fact about the historical, social, or cultural context of the text at hand. (1-2 points)</p>	<p>Papers in this category fail to give any discussion of the historical, social, or cultural contexts for any of the texts under discussion in the paper. (0 points)</p>	<p>/5</p>

IV. Teaching and Learning Activities

Once you have formulated learning goals, student learning objectives, and designed assessments for your course, you have the basics you need to identify meaningful teaching and learning activities for your course. Teaching and learning activities should be selected that best facilitate learning and help students meet the objectives. Fink (2013) suggests answering the following questions at this stage:

- What will the students actually do (the learning activities) in the course?
- What will you do (the teaching activities) to make significant learning happen?

Active Learning

Many Liberal Studies courses invite students to engage with concepts very new to them. Some students may have experience in the area, but still need additional foundational knowledge to be successful in the specific course. Often, lecture and reading course materials provide this foundational knowledge. Learning can occur from these activities as long as students are engaged in thinking about the material; however, lectures and reading assignments often ask students to take in information and internalize it with little feedback or interaction with the instructor or other students. For foundational knowledge to stick, students must be cognitively engaged in the learning process. Integrating class discussion and interactive activities into lectures can help move lectures from mere transmission of knowledge to an experience that reinforces learning and contextualizes the information presented. The same can be said for reading or watching course materials. Here are a few examples of techniques for moving mere presentation of information toward active learning that can enhance meaning-making and knowledge retention:

- Create reading guides and low-stakes reading reflection activities.
- Incorporate think-pair-share or other small group activities into lectures, asking students to work together to summarize content or revise answers to class questions.
- Incorporate interactive questions or polling into lectures using free or available technologies.

Active learning takes many forms. Even lectures can be active when facilitated along with discussion or interactive technology. Fink (2013) notes three components of active learning: experiences, getting information and ideas, and reflection that occurs in a course. These components can be infused into a course through many different types of activities. The key is to choose activities that best help you facilitate learning. This figure from Fink exhibits some activities that promote active learning:¹⁶

¹⁶ From L. Dee Fink & Associates' *"Self-Directed Guide for Designing Courses for Significant Learning"*, 2003, available at <https://www.deefinkandassociates.com/index.php/resources/>

Figure 6. Learning Activities for Active Learning

LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR HOLISTIC, ACTIVE LEARNING

	GETTING INFORMATION & IDEAS	EXPERIENCE		REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE, with:	
		"Doing"	"Observing"	Self	Others
DIRECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary data Primary sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Real Doing," in authentic settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct observation of phenomena 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflective thinking Journaling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue (in or out of class)
INDIRECT, VICARIOUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary data and sources Lectures, textbooks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case Studies Gaming, Simulations Role Play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stories (can be accessed via: film, oral history, literature) 		
ONLINE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Course website Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher can assign students to "directly experience _____." Students can engage in "indirect" kinds of experience online. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students can reflect and then engage in various kinds of dialogue online. 	

Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) suggest learning more about specific active learning skills and strategies that may be effective for your subject, such as:

- **Group-based learning:** Examples include think-pair-share, peer teaching, team activities, debates, online or in-person group work, learning communities.¹⁷
- **Experiential learning:** A broad term for learning activities in and beyond the classroom in which students have hands-on experiences to reinforce classroom learning. Experiential learning activities might include role-playing, service-learning, creative works and projects, conducting research, or laboratory exercises.
- **Case-based teaching:** Students discuss narratives, situations, data, or real-life scenarios in which they use what they are learning in class to "solve" the case. Activities are discussion-based and focused on contextual learning. Students grapple with "how" and "why".¹⁸
- **Problem-based learning:** An inquiry-based instructional model where learners engaged with real-life problems that require further research. Students identify gaps in their knowledge, build research skills, and cultivate problem solving as

¹⁷ Resources on group work:

Choosing the Best Approach to Group Work from *Faculty Focus*:

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/choosing-the-best-approach-for-small-group-work/>

How to Improve Group Work: Perspectives from Students from *Faculty Focus*:

<https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/how-to-improve-group-work-perspectives-from-students/>

¹⁸ Adapted from <https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-strategies/the-case-method>; also visit <http://sciencecases.lib.buffalo.edu/cs/> for resources specific to case-based learning in the sciences

- they study and grapple with the issue. This can be constructed as an individual or group project.¹⁹
- **Project-based learning:** A specific form of problem-based learning in which “the emphasis is on the connection between course concepts and the world beyond the classroom”.²⁰ Unlike case-based learning, the project typically lasts the entire semester and it focuses on a large, complex problem and solutions based in course content.
 - **Using classroom-based or web 2.0 technologies:** At FSU, this approach commonly includes using audience response systems such as i>clicker and TurningTechnologies, though there are other web- and app-based response systems available at no- or low-cost. Useful Web 2.0 technologies for learning include online mind-mapping programs, group collaboration tools like wikis, blog development, and content curation tools.

They also provide specific suggestions for active learning in large classes, online instruction, and laboratory settings.

Selecting Teaching and Learning Activities

Given all the options, how do you choose the best teaching and learning activities for your course? This will depend on the context of your course and your learning goals. Naturally, activities should prepare students for success on the course assessments you have designed. They could even be “low-stakes” assessments in and of themselves. However, do not lose sight of the overarching goals for significant learning you established for your course, especially those in the four types of learning that frequently are less likely to receive attention in course design: integration, the human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn (see section 2.2.2 on page 2). Your various teaching and learning activities are where you can directly address goals that may not have been explicitly targeted in your formal assessments, which generally focus on the remaining two types of learning: foundational knowledge and its application.²¹

As the semester progresses, you might consider more cognitively complex activities. Low-complexity activities that do not require extensive knowledge, or on-the-spot applications like large-group discussion or think-pair-share, are most appropriate early in the semester. High-complexity activities, like inquiry learning or role playing, are more appropriate once students have the knowledge and experience to apply what they have learned.²² This figure from the University of Michigan and related resource provides

¹⁹ For additional problem-based learning design considerations, visit <http://www1.udel.edu/inst/> or <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/problem-based-learning-six-steps-to-design-implement-and-assess/>

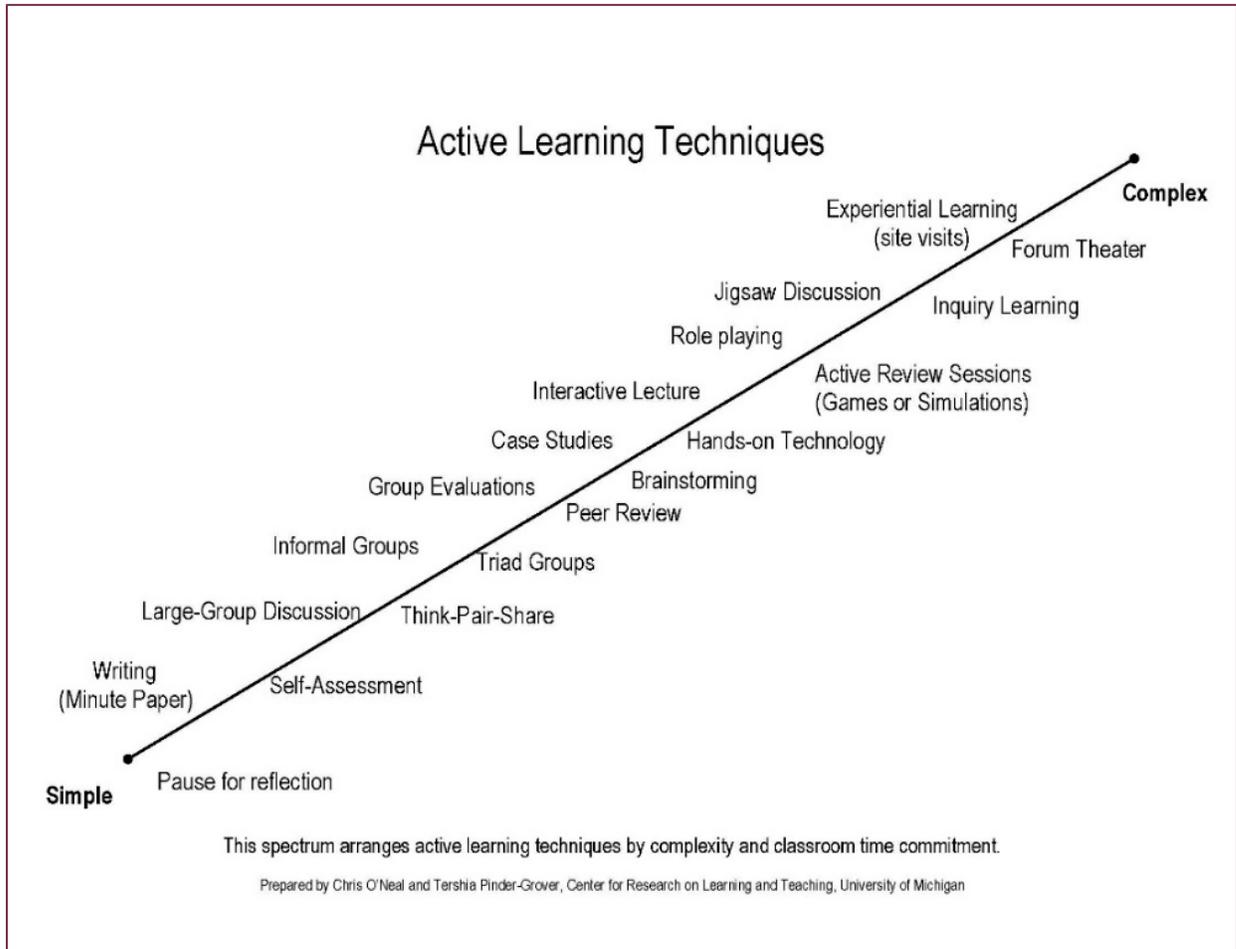
²⁰ From Paul Hanstedt’s *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*, p. 60.

²¹ The K. Patricia Cross Academy has an extensive [video library of teaching techniques](#) and associated material that can be filtered by learning dimension.

²² From Chris O’Neal and Tershia Pinder-Grover’s resource available at http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Active%20Learning%20Continuum%20Techniques.pdf

examples of activities by level of complexity and how they can be incorporated into classes:²³

Figure 7. Active Learning Techniques by Level of Complexity



To keep yourself on track, it may be helpful to expand your matrix to align activities with your SLOs and assessments. Here is an example (Figure 8):

²³ From Chris O'Neal and Tershia Pinder-Grover's resource available at http://www.crlt.umich.edu/sites/default/files/resource_files/Active%20Learning%20Continuum%20Techniques.pdf

Figure 8. *Aligning Your Objectives, Outcomes, Assessments, and Teaching Activities*

Course Goals (broad and general)	Student Learning Objectives (specific and assessable—what students will be able to do reflecting the course goal)	Assessments (how students demonstrate achievement of each learning objective)	Teaching and Learning Activities (active and passive activities that reinforce foundational knowledge and prep students for assessments—students “do” and “reflect”)
1. Help students become competent analytical and flexible thinkers and lifelong learners. (E-Series course goal)	1. Analyze the major questions or problems in the course using various intellectual perspectives.	The final paper will assess students on their abilities to research and articulate aspects of national identity and culture. 50% of the paper grade is allocated to quality and content of the argument.	In-class discussions; debates; class presentations on history and culture in London; music theater and music studies and in-person experiences attending performances in London
		In-class discussions will investigate such questions as, how do the arts reflect cultural identity and political thought? What are some ways that the arts can advocate for or reflect social change?	In-class discussions; debates
	2. Demonstrate the relevance of ideas or findings from the course.	Students will give presentations on sites of historical and cultural significance to be visited.	Small group research projects and in-class presentations, involving music analysis.
		Journal assignments will have students chronicle their experiences in daily entries that discuss what they have seen and contextualize it within the course’s intellectual framework.	Reflection and analysis activity: In their journals, students will be expected to reflect on how the cultural materials studied in the course are manifest in their own experiences on the trip.
	3. Communicate arguments central to the course using clear, coherent prose that utilizes the conventions of standard American English.	Journal assignments (see above).	Journaling (see above).
		Final paper, in which 30% of the grade is allocated for “clarity of writing and coherence of narrative.”	Paper preparation and drafting activities. Individual meetings with students.
	4. Discuss relevant ideas from the course using sources from a variety of text types.	Final research paper requires students to integrate printed, audio, video, and online sources into their work (20% of paper grade).	Listening and viewing media throughout the course and in-person through London experience (experiential learning).

Structuring Your Course

Finally, you are ready to integrate these ideas into a well-planned course by creating the overall structure of the course and then the syllabus.

Creating a thematic structure for the course involves looking at “the whole of the subject of the course and [identifying] the most important concepts, issues, topics, or themes” (Fink, 2013, p.142). These can then be organized into a structure for the course – often as units and then weekly/daily sessions. You should also consider which kind or organization methods best help you organize course content in way that helps students understand the relationships between ideas and details in your course content: categorical, chronological, methodological, theoretical, and/or use of course content.²⁴

Ideally, content should build on itself from week to week, and unit to unit, so students are prepared to undertake more complex tasks and perform well on assessments. You should also determine what preparation students need before class periods (like readings, online discussions, or other activities). You can then integrate your assessments, teaching and learning activities, and class-preparation activities for students into a matrix that outlines the flow of your course. A blank matrix is included in Appendix B for your use.

Figure 9. Integrating Your Choices: A Matrix for Course Structure and Unit Design

Major themes/ content areas (units)	Topics addressed (weekly or by class period)	Student Learning Objectives (map which SLOs will be addressed)	Related Assessment (how students demonstrate achievement of the learning objectives)	Teaching and Learning Activities (active and passive; in- or out-of-class; prepare students for assessments)

²⁴ From Paul Hanstedt’s *Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*.