



Pre-Class Assignments

Purpose

This tool explores the various categories of pre-class assignments, their respective purposes, and principles for effective implementation and assessment.

Description

Pre-class preparation is essential for successful in-class experiences. Instructors who use pre-class preparation are then able to use limited class time to direct students' efforts to higher-order skills, such as analyzing, comparing inferring, and evaluating. This tool describes various assignments and activities that you can use to help students prepare for class.

Examples

Pre-class assignments can be used not only to familiarize students with new material, but to help them engage it more deeply. This preparation will enhance the learning process when students share with one another. The following is a short list of various types of pre-class assignments that have proven successful in the past when properly structured and supported.

Reading and Writing Assignments

- **Online quiz.** Give an open-book, multiple-choice, online quiz before class. Review their answers prior to class and adapt activities for concepts students may still be struggling with. Some instructors allow students to take the quiz as often as they like until they're satisfied with their grade.
- **Mini-debate.** Assign your students a particular stand on an issue before they read the assigned material. Provide study guides to insure that they read through the lens of the assigned position. Then allow them to carry out a structured mini-debate on a discussion board before class in which they post comments and rebuttals.
- **Types of questions.** To help the students understand difficult or new material, have them write and respond to their own questions. The question types to be used can be as follows:
 - **Classification questions:** (Are you saying. . .? What does this mean. . .? How could I rephrase. . .? How is the author using...?)
 - **Verification questions:** (What do other authors say about...? Is this reasoning consistent with...? What would be an example of. . .? Would this work given. . .? Doesn't this contradict. . .?)
 - **Understanding questions:** (What is the context of...? Is this related to. . .? What would this imply about. . .? Does this require that. . .?)
 - **Evaluation questions:** (Is this good. . ." true...? right...? beautiful...? in good taste...? a priority...? better than...?)
 - **Application question:** (How is this used. . .? Does this always work. . .? What hazards are there in doing this. . .?)
- **Polls or surveys.** These can be similar to an online quiz but with less implication of a right or wrong answer. Use polls to assess the pulse of a class, particularly for complex or qualitative judgments.
- **Blogs.** Have your students write on their blogs for ten minutes on a specific question or text. In class, call on students to elaborate on their notes as a catalyst for class discussion.
- **Capture activity.** This involves requiring students to "capture" the reading. The capture format is a structured set of questions that a student answers about each text. In this, the students identify:
 - **Purpose.** The reason the author wrote and the audience or problem addressed.
 - **Main assertion.** The thesis or core argument.
 - **Support.** Arguments internal to the document that are used to bolster the assertion, or arguments, external to the text that could strengthen and/or weaken the author's assertion.
 - **Relevance.** The importance of the assertion as related to other ideas or assertions, the relative



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value or weight of the assertion.

Research or Student Experience

- **Scholarly journals.** Have your students come to class with two articles from scholarly journals that address a specific question.
- **Interview.** Have your students interview an individual with knowledge of or experience to a class unit or topic prior to its discussion in class.
- **Link List.** Have students gather links to quality websites with good resources for their study.

Preview of Class Activities

- **Posting slides.** Post your PowerPoint and notes before each class and possibly give an extra credit quiz at the beginning of class.
- **Discussion questions.** Post a thought-provoking question in an online discussion board and then poll the student responses prior to class.
- **Fair warning.** Hold students accountable for detailed preparation of a case student by telling students that you will cold call them to present an aspect of the assignment. Include their presentation of the idea in the grade.

Group Assignments

- **Poster session.** Assign groups to create a poster describe a time period or idea. Then use class time for student preparation.

Other Strategies

- **Group quizzes** (leverage accountability to peers). Students prepare during class time in their study groups and then each take the quiz online after class. Their grade is a combination of their score and an average of the group's scores.
- **Alternate Group Quiz.** Discussion groups fill out and turn in a single quiz form.
- **Classroom entry "tickets."** Turn-in preparation at the door.
- **Self-reporting.** Students are gratifying honest.
- **Referencing** by name pre-class student work.
- **Sufficient weight** to affect student grades.

Tips

- **Structure as appropriate.** Structuring of the activity by the instructor is critical.
- **Focus research.** Research assignments need to be bounded and focused to insure quality results. Searches should be structured around a specific problem or question, not around a general topic.
- **Give assignments form.** Previews of class activities, whether notes, PowerPoint slides or online discussions need to be presented as more than browsing material. Link to specific questions or even a quiz.
- **Clarify early.** Clarifying pre-class assignments at the very beginning of the term helps set the tone, explain expectations, and establish the classroom culture.
- **Assign preparation consistently.** Assigning pre-class work on a regular, weekly cycle helps insure a higher level of student preparation.



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Pitfalls

- **Too much.** There are many helpful pre-class assignments and it can be easy to overuse or require too many different kinds at once.
- **Disconnection.** The pre-class assignment can easily become disconnected from the class activities through simple over-generalization of assignments (write about what you read).

Resources

GE, X., Yamashiro, A., Lee. (2000). Pre-class planning to scaffold students for online collaborative learning activities. *Educational Technology & Society*, 3(3).