

## Writing Clear and Concise Instructions

### Consider your audience

Consider who you are writing your instructions for. If you teach linguistically and culturally diverse learners, then you need to avoid cultural references that may not be shared, and complex language that is linguistically challenging or too vague.

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### Make the purpose of the assessment clear

Make the connection between the course objective and the assessment clear. The assessment tasks should be directly related to what has been covered in class. If you let your learners know the most important concepts to focus on, on an on-going basis in class, then they will be more confident when completing the assessment.

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### Break the instructions down into steps

Rather than writing a paragraph style set of instructions, break the instructions down into logical numbered steps. Each step should be a single action. For complex instructions, break the instructions into sections with headings.

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### Use active voice

Passive voice can be confusing for some students. Use imperatives in short simple statements. Example:

Write a bulleted point form description of the process involved in making maple syrup.

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### Be selective in your word choice

Use unambiguous language. Choose words that your students are familiar with and words that do not have multiple meanings. If you must use complex terms, define them. Avoid using slang, similes, metaphors and flowery language.

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### Use clear and concise language

- Use short, complete sentences and concrete language. Avoid complex sentence constructions, double negatives and idiomatic language. Avoid using pronouns - use the noun instead even if you repeat the noun within the sentence(s).
- Be clear in your instructions - instead of saying there are a few mistakes in this passage to correct, indicate that there are three errors to correct.

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### **Use parallel structure**

When presenting several steps, use the same grammatical structure to present the steps. This helps with the readability and consistency of the instructions.

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### **Design with differentiated learners in mind**

Consider if there is a graphic or image that you can include to help illustrate your instructions. To ensure that your instructions are accessible to all your learners, follow AODA guidelines for font size, type face, headings, colour and white space.

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### **Make expectations clear**

Articulate exactly what you want to see in the response. If a bulleted point form answer is acceptable - indicate this; on the other hand, if you are expecting a paragraph response with a topic sentence and clear supporting details - say that explicitly. State that you want a complete sentence, several sentences, point form responses etc. Don't assume learners know what to expect if you have not clearly explained the parameters. For example, if students are writing an in-class assessment, is it an open book test? Can they have notes written in the margins of their books? If it is a take-home test, can they collaborate with classmates to respond? Be more explicit with your instructions than you may think is necessary - do not assume they know what you expect.

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### **Include a rubric or marking scale**

Include a rubric for answers, tests, and assignments. The rubric should be sufficiently detailed to indicate what is being prioritized in the grading.

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### **Explain the instructions in another modality**

Explain your instructions orally before the learners start the assessment. Clarify any questions.

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### **Preview the format of the assessment**

Walk students through the assessment indicating which questions have the greatest point value to help them prioritize which questions to spend more time on.

### **Ask a friend or colleague**

Ask a friend or colleague to read through your instructions. You may think you have written your instructions very clearly but things that seem clear to you may not have the same meaning for others.

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### **Assign a reasonable time frame**

If your primary purpose is to assess students' understanding of the course content and attainment of the course objectives, then carefully consider assessments that are timed. Unless you are assessing a skill that needs to be completed within a specific period of time such as a medical procedure, then there is a good chance that if you do not allow sufficient time to complete the assessment, the results will not be a true reflection of your students' capabilities. One way to estimate the time required to complete an assessment is to take the test / exam yourself, and then triple the time. If you do not have sufficient class time available, simplify the assessment or reduce the number of questions.