

# Duke University Thompson Writing Program

## Designing Inclusive Course Assignments and Syllabi

### Assignments

#### Consider the cultural backgrounds of your students

Determine if students have the cultural knowledge needed to complete the assignment. What cultural challenges might your assignment pose for certain students?

**For example:** Analyze the unforeseen negative impacts of this U.S. governmental program.

An assignment prompt of this sort draws on cultural knowledge that non-U.S. students may lack. The prompt also presumes that students will feel safe in criticizing a government program, an act that could have negative consequences in some cultures.

#### Expand the choices an assignment offers

Whenever possible, invite students to incorporate their cultural background and knowledge into an assignment.

**For example:**

Analyze an x crisis that occurred in the United States during time period y.

*versus*

Analyze an x crisis that occurred in the United States, your homeland, or one of the following countries during time period y.

Compare and contrast aspects of an x type of crisis that occurred in the United States with aspects of that type of crisis in your homeland or one of the following countries.

#### Provide specific guidelines

Share a detailed description of the goals and requirements of the assignment as well as how you plan to evaluate it. Provide clear guidelines for the specific genre of writing (public policy memo, op-ed, lab report, research proposal, technical report, close reading). When feasible, share a sample text with your students.

#### Monitor ease of understanding

Consider minimizing or explaining idiomatic or metaphorical language (“through the lens of,” “weigh in on”) as well as cultural references that may be obscure for students.

**Idioms resource:** <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com>

# Duke University Thompson Writing Program

## Designing Inclusive Course Assignments and Syllabi

### Syllabi

#### Monitor ease of understanding

Consider minimizing your use of idiomatic or metaphorical language. Clarify cultural references that may be obscure for students.

Craft a clear late policy: “1 to 24 hours late results in a loss of x points, 25 to 48 hours late...” If your policy uses “one day late,” explain if that means the penalty will only be imposed 24 hours after the deadline or if the “day” changes at midnight or daybreak.

#### Consider your approach to participation

Recognize that some students participate in class in quiet ways. If participation will impact students’ grades in your course, incorporate and credit them for pair and group work as well as for their other forms of participation. Encourage students to participate via Sakai (or similar) forums or through virtual chat, counting that towards their participation grade.

#### Emphasize your availability

Explain and normalize office hour visits, welcoming students to see you. Office hours are less prevalent or less-frequently used in some cultures. Going to visit a professor during office hours could have a negative connotation for students from certain cultures.

#### Consider the pacing of coursework

Allow adequate time in your class plans for students to complete various work, including peer review, outside class as well as in class. During class, do not require students to quickly read or write.

#### Align grading with course priorities

When grading a writing assignment, consider prioritizing its thesis and evidence as well as content you’ve prioritized during the semester. De-prioritize language issues that do not interfere with comprehensibility.

*Rene D. Caputo  
Duke University ESL Specialist  
Thompson Writing Program  
r.caputo@duke.edu*