

Accessible Assignments Through Document Design

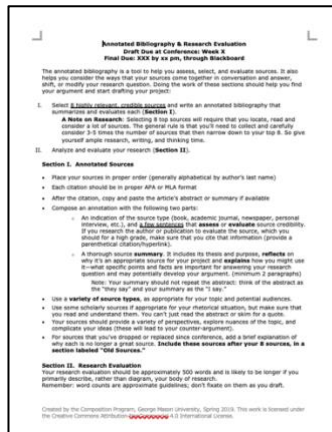
Assignment Prompts: Directions and Disconnect

There is often a disconnect between how instructors and students interpret the content of assignment prompts, which can lead to students not meeting learning objectives. Gen Z students are part of the No Child Left Behind generation and are used to reading in highly structured environments. Digital natives are also part of a very visual culture who are used to colorful user interfaces and minimal text. Students consume information differently and may feel intimidated by text-heavy assignment instructions. Instructors may overlook document design in creating assignment prompts to meet the changing needs of students.

Although the assignment prompts themselves can be useful in teaching students how to read “at the college level,” the prompt itself ultimately doesn’t matter—what matters is that students are able to do the projects we give them.

Formatting Failure: ENGH 101 Annotated Bibliography Assignment

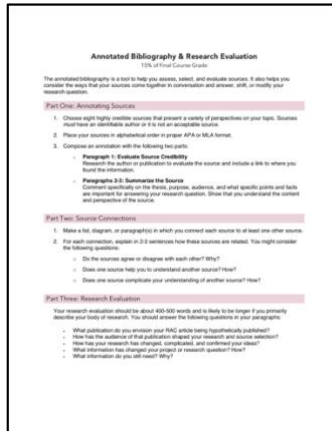
In Fall of 2019, I provided the prompt below—which was designed by the Composition Program—to students for an annotated bibliography project. Just by looking at the document, I realized that students would have problems with it. It was a four-part assignment that was divided into two sections, which many students had trouble understanding. It’s text-heavy, inconsistent with indentation, and uses bolding/underlining in a way that isn’t helpful and makes it more visually cluttered.



Out of 14 students who turned it in, the average score was an 86%, which isn’t bad, but it’s largely an assignment of ticking off boxes. A lot of it had to do with getting extensive feedback on it, and the rough drafts for it showed just how confused students were when trying to complete this assignment. I polled students at the end of the semester and more than 50% of them said they didn’t read them entire prompt. Others said that it was hard to find specific instructions within it. All of them indicated that it was confusing.

Revised Prompt: ENGH 101 Annotated Bibliography Assignment

In Spring 2020, I revised the prompt to make information more concise and clearly divided. I added a little bit of color to make it more visually organized and used more bullets and white space. Students were not confused about the various parts anymore and the average grade went up by almost 10 points.



Document Design Strategies for Approachable Assignments

- Make use of white space.
- Use color with enough contrast for blind, low-vision, or color blind students.
- Include numbered or bulleted lists instead of dense paragraphs.
- Use meaningful bolding, italicizing, or underlining—but not in excess.
- Include titles and headings for students who use screen readers.

Additional Resources

Andersen, Rebekka. "Teaching Visual Rhetoric as a Close Reading Strategy." *Composition Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, University of Cincinnati on behalf of Composition Studies, Oct. 2016, pp. 15–38, 233, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1873941985/>.

Lowe, M. Sara, et al. "Impact of Assignment Prompt on Information Literacy Performance in First-Year Student Writing." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 42, no. 2, Elsevier Inc, Mar. 2016, pp. 127–34, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2016.01.002.