A stylized sun graphic on the left side of the slide. It features a large, solid dark blue circle representing the sun's disk, with several short, curved blue lines radiating from its top-left edge to represent sunbeams. The background is a dark green gradient with a large white semi-circle on the right side.

# Purpose, Task, and Criteria: Designing Transparent & Effective Assignments

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**STEARNS CENTER FOR  
TEACHING AND LEARNING**  
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## GOALS for this presentation

By the end of this presentation, you should be able to

- Explain **what** transparent assignment design is
- Explain **how it benefits** faculty and students (including saving time!)
- Identify **steps you can take** to clarify your assignment instructions
- Consider **questions or challenges** you might face in adapting an assignment
- Identify strategies for **assessing the impact** of your revised assignment(s)

# WHAT is Transparent Assignment Design?

“**Transparent Assignment Design**” is an approach developed by the Transparency in Learning and Teaching ([TILT](#)) research collective, headed by Mary-Ann Winkelmes.

The **purpose of TILT** is to help faculty create assignment instructions that promote student engagement and success by

- Lessening the “hidden curriculum” of college courses and assignments
- Contextualizing learning so that students relate it to their broader values and goals
- Focusing instructors’ and students’ attention on the most important learning priorities


# WHY is Transparent Assignment Design important?

The TILT collective found that assignments using their structure improved student experience and retention, even when students had ***as few as two TILTed tasks total*** in a college term.



**WHY** is this  
important to  
students?

**Students** who experience better  
assignments

- work with more **confidence**
  - complete assignments more **accurately**
  - are **retained** in the course, the major,  
and university at higher rates
- 

## WHY is this important to faculty?

**Faculty** who design better assignments

- build stronger **relationships** with students
- increase their ability to identify the most **meaningful learning** they want from students
- improve their **communication** with students about crucial elements of their field or discipline
- are more efficient and effective in **grading**, because more student responses are on track

HOW do we  
know any of  
this?

### Research Study #1

- 7 minority-serving institutions, 1800 students, 35 faculty
- Faculty used a TILT approach for two assignments in one course
- **TILT boosted student learning in 3 ways** (student survey results)
  - Academic **confidence** increased
  - Sense of **belonging** increased
  - Metacognitive **awareness** of skill development increased

### Research Study #2

- 800+ students
- **TILT boosted student retention**: Those enrolled in courses with 2 TILTed assignments were 15% more likely to be retained into the 2nd & 3rd year
- Retention gains for underrepresented students even higher

Study 1: Winkelmes et al., *Peer Review* Spring 2016

Study 2: Unpublished university data [available at this link](#)

HOW do I  
use the TILT  
approach?

## The TILT Assignment Template

(Full copy included at the end of this slide deck)

### Specify the assignment **purpose**

- Identify the **skills** students will practice
- Identify the **knowledge** they will gain
- Identify the **relevance** of this learning

### Specify the **tasks/steps**

- Explain exactly what students will do
- Explain how students will do it (steps to follow, avoid)

### Specify **criteria** for success & provide a model

- Provide a checklist or rubric in advance so students can self-evaluate
- Provide examples of what excellence looks like (annotated examples that exhibit strong performance)



**WAIT**, do I  
have to do  
**ALL** that?  
What's left  
for students  
to do?

Faculty who are just starting to work with TILT assignment design often **raise questions** such as

- Doesn't this make work **too easy** for college students?
- What if I want my students to **explore or struggle** to find their own way?
- Won't giving examples or models push students toward just **replicating** a model rather than thinking and creating?
- Isn't this overly **complicated** for just a regular assignment?

# HOW DO I BALANCE support and challenge?

These are great questions. The TILT team has some helpful extended [answers here](#).

## Generally, it's important to remember that

- Faculty are experts who can forget how difficult the tasks are that we assign novices
- Students who want to succeed are often afraid to ask questions and seem stupid
- Providing more context and careful guidelines helps all students start off strong, so you can ask for higher-order thinking
- Even with more explicit framing,  
**your assignment will still be hard!**

# HOW DO I IMPROVE LEARNING

by taking on  
this work?

## **Faculty we've worked with tell us**

- It's straightforward once they get started
- They have “aha!” moments about places where they're cramming too much into one assignment and overwhelming students
- They like showing students why the work of the field is important

## **In addition, increased assignment clarity helps faculty**

- align assignments to support key outcomes
- design relevant practice exercises or activities for students
- engage students in the actual problem not just the instructions

## HOW DO I SAVE TIME by taking on this work?

More concretely: Assignments that disclose their purpose and context, specify key steps, and focus attention on key criteria for success can **save faculty time**:

- Faculty may **save class time** because students have fewer questions
- **Faculty may save time in grading** because more students will produce acceptable work that is easier to comment on
- **Faculty may save time in grading** because having clear criteria will focus everyone's attention, and reduce misunderstandings or even grade complaints
- Faculty report that they **enjoy reviewing student work more** when students understand the assignment better

**WHAT** does a transparent assignment even look like?

**Faculty who are just starting to explore this assignment-design process** often wonder

- What **kind of** assignments can I use this for?
- Will this work for assignments **in my field**?
- Won't this just make my assignment descriptions **extra long** and unreadable?

**It can be helpful to look at some models, which are [available online](#). We suggest you**

- Look at one assignment **not in your field**, considering your “novice” response to pre/post: Did the changes help you?
- Look at an assignment **close to your field**, and identify strategies you can use.

HOW will I  
know if my  
assignments  
are working?

**Any of these events might signal** that your efforts are having positive impact:

- **You realize** some important elements of your assignment that you want to focus more on
- More students **complete the assignment** the way you had imagined
- More students seem to see **how assignments connect** to larger principles

And if you want, you can always **ask your students**, directly or via a survey: Were they confident doing the task? Do they know how they will be evaluated? Do they see its relevance?

# Final QUIZ:

## What are the key elements of transparent assignment design?

**Before you go**, take a moment to recap:

**What is the purpose/value of using a TILT approach?**

- Can you identify how transparent assignments are relevant/helpful for faculty and/or students?
- Can you recall any skills or knowledge **you** could gain by using this approach?

**What are the tasks/steps in designing an assignment?**

- What are the **three parts** of the framework? (ahem!)
- What might be some of your next steps?

**What are the criteria for success with TILT?**

- Where can you find some models to look at?
- How could you evaluate whether your assignment changes are helping?

## Additional Resources

**In the following pages, you can find**

- The full assignment template
- One pre/post example of an assignment
- A bibliography of research supporting this approach

**For more information/practice,** keep an eye out for Stearns Center [workshops](#) on “Transforming Assignments for Student Success”



## Transparent Assignment Template

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*This template can be used as a guide for developing, explaining, and discussing class activities and out-of-class assignments. Making these aspects of each course activity or assignment explicitly clear to students has demonstrably enhanced students' learning in a national study.<sup>1</sup>*

### Assignment Name

Due date:

**Purpose:** Define the learning objectives, in language and terms that help students recognize how this assignment will benefit their learning. Indicate how these are connected with institutional learning outcomes, and how the specific knowledge and skills involved in this assignment will be important in students' lives beyond the contexts of this assignment, this course, and this college.

**Skills:** The purpose of this assignment is to help you practice the following skills that are essential to your success in this course / in school / in this field / in professional life beyond school:

*Terms from Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives may help you explain these skills in language students will understand. Listed from cognitively simple to most complex, these skills are:*

- understanding basic disciplinary knowledge and methods/tools
- applying basic disciplinary knowledge/tools to problem-solving in a similar but unfamiliar context
- analyzing
- synthesizing
- judging/evaluating and selecting best solutions
- creating/inventing a new interpretation, product, theory

**Knowledge:** This assignment will also help you to become familiar with the following important content knowledge in this discipline:

- ...
- ...

**Task:** Define what activities the student should do/perform. "Question cues" from this chart might be helpful:

<http://www.asainstitute.org/conference2013/handouts/20-Bloom-Question-Cues-Chart.pdf>. List any steps or guidelines, or a recommended sequence for the students' efforts. Specify any extraneous mistakes to be avoided. If there are sound pedagogical reasons for withholding information about how to do the assignment, protect students' confidence and sense of belonging in college with a purpose statement something like this: "The purpose of this assignment is for you to struggle and feel confused while you invent and test your own approach for addressing the problem..."

### Criteria for Success:

*Define the characteristics of the finished product. Provide multiple examples of what these characteristics look like in real-world practice, to encourage students' creativity and reduce their incentive to copy any one example too closely. Engage students in analyzing multiple examples of real-world work before the students begin their own work on the assignment. Discuss how excellent work differs from adequate work. This enables students to evaluate the quality of their own efforts while they are working, and to judge the success of their completed work. It is often useful to provide or compile with students a checklist of characteristics of successful work. Students can also use the checklist to provide feedback on peers' coursework. Indicate whether this task/product will be graded and/or how it factors into the student's overall grade for the course. Later, asking students to reflect and comment on their completed, graded work allows them to focus on changes to their learning strategies that might improve their future work.*

The author developed an earlier version of this template at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

<sup>1</sup> Winkelmes, Mary-Ann. "Transparency in Teaching: Faculty Share Data and Improve Students' Learning." *Liberal Education* 99,2 (Spring 2013); Winkelmes et al, "A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success." *Peer Review* 18,1/2 (Winter/Spring 2016).



**(LESS TRANSPARENT)**

**PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland**

**PAPER INSTRUCTIONS**

Your task is to explore a psychological topic in relation to your life, in a 3-4 page paper. Papers should be (a) double-spaced, (b) 12 pt Times New Roman font, (c) include your name in the header, and (d) a title at the top of the first page. Papers will be graded on the following criteria: (a) addressing the question / topic, (b) writing quality, (c) integrating outside sources (at least one quality source; if you are not sure whether something is a good source, ask me), and (d) following instructions.

**TOPIC:**

One of my goals in this course is to introduce students to ideas that can potentially change the way that they view the world. This can relate to any topic in psychology (e.g., how people learn, disorders of the brain, how memory functions, intelligence, what happens when we sleep, personality, how people interact with others, etc.), because psychological research is applicable to so many aspects of human life. Pick something that you have learned in this course that has changed the way you view the world. For example, imagine if on the first day of class I had asked you something like “how does short-term memory work?” and your answer then was very different than what you learned later in the semester from lecture/textbook. Think about the idea more deeply (especially in the context of your life), and apply it to your philosophy of life.

Once you have an idea, describe how you used to think about the topic, discuss the topic itself (i.e., what you learned about it), and then explain how your view has changed going forward. Please be as specific as possible when writing.

## (MORE TRANSPARENT)

### PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland

#### CHANGING BELIEFS: IN-CLASS ACTIVITY (beginning of term)

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this activity is to help you monitor how your beliefs change throughout the semester. To do this, you will do a metacognitive activity (thinking about your own thinking) by answering some questions to document your current beliefs. These questions relate to some of the important topics we will study in this class. Later in the semester, we will look again at your views on these same questions.

**TASK:** Your task is to answer the following questions based on what you truly think (do not look them up online or in your textbook). After you answer each question, please note, using a scale from 1 to 5, how confident you are in your answer (1 = not at all confident, 3 = somewhat confident, 5 = extremely confident).

- (1) What percent of the brain do people use?
- (2) When we look at an object, do we always see that object? If yes, why? If not, why not?
- (3) Why do we dream? What is happening in our minds / brains?
- (4) Do abilities such as extra-sensory perception (ESP), including reading people's minds or seeing the future, exist?
- (5) Briefly, how does memory work?
- (6) Is intelligence an easily measured construct that is stable throughout one's life?
- (7) Do most people use stereotypes? Do you?
- (8) Can humans and animals be trained using similar methods? Why or why not?
- (9) Are most people generally good or generally bad?
- (10) How can we measure a person's personality? Is it possible?

Your completed assignment should include two or three sentences in response to each question. Bring this write-up with you to the next class and you will pair up with a classmate. When paired up, you will swap papers and read through each other's answers to determine whether you can understand each other's views.

**CRITERIA:** You will be successful in this activity if you can: (a) Provide an answer to all of the questions with descriptions that are clear to another reader, and (b) Provide feedback to a classmate about how clearly you can understand their answers.

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### PSYCHOLOGY 101, David Copeland

#### CHANGING BELIEFS: TAKE-HOME ASSIGNMENT (end of term)

**PURPOSE:** One of my goals in this course is to introduce students to ideas that can potentially change the way that they view the world. This can relate to any major topic area in psychology (e.g., how the brain functions, how we perceive, how people learn, sleep and dreams, how memory functions, intelligence, personality, how people interact with others socially, or disorders). The purpose is to identify a topic for which your prior view of it has changed as a result of what you learned in this course. You should be able to compare and analyze how your thinking / beliefs are different now than before.

**TASK:** Your task is to: (1) Select a topic that you have learned about in this course that has changed the way you view the world. You are encouraged to refer back to your answers to the questions in the Changing Beliefs Activity from the beginning of the semester. (2) Once you have an idea, describe in a paragraph or two how you used to think about the topic. (Refer back to your

responses to the Changing Beliefs activity from the beginning of term.) (3) Then, discuss the topic itself (i.e., what you learned about it). Please use the library to find an outside source – a peer reviewed psychology research article – to help you write a more thorough description of the selected concept. (4) Finally, explain how your view has changed going forward. Please be as specific as possible and please apply this to your own life and way of thinking (i.e., please do not generalize or write about how most people think).

Your completed assignment should be between 3 to 4 pages (typed, double-spaced). Include your name and a title in the header. Include a reference for your outside source at the end, using APA style formatting rules.

**CRITERIA:** Your assignment will be graded based on the following criteria: (a) Did you select a topic discussed in this course? (b) Can I clearly understand your prior way of thinking about that concept? (c) Do you provide a clear description of the topic that demonstrates that you can summarize the important aspects of it? Is information from the outside source nicely integrated into this description? (d) Can I clearly understand your current way of thinking about that concept? Did you contrast this to your prior view? (e) Finally, following instructions and quality of writing will be evaluated as well (e.g., proper grammar, spelling, etc.).

# Creating Equitable Learning Opportunities Through Transparent Assignment Design

Mary-Ann Winkelmes, Founder, TILT Higher Ed  
Executive Director, Center for Teaching and Learning, Brandeis University

The new incoming student population in U.S. higher education is increasingly diverse, multi-generational and non-traditional. Yet these are the same students colleges and universities often struggle to serve adequately. **Transparent instruction** is a technique that promotes student success on several dimensions and is easy to apply in both online and face-to-face settings. Studies have shown that using transparent assignments significantly enhances the performance, academic self-confidence, sense of belonging, and persistence of all students, with historically underserved students showing the greatest gains (Winkelmes et al., 2016; Gianoutsos & Winkelmes, 2016; Winkelmes et al., 2019).

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