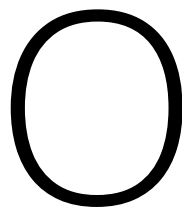


ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Clarity: An Important Pedagogical Tool

By Regan A. R. Gurung | January 5, 2026



One of my favorite assignments is having students discuss the role of belief in day-to-day life. What we believe influences our behavior in many ways. If you believe God exists, you'll act in a certain way. Likewise, if you believe there's a devil. While I take an interdisciplinary perspective in the class, *Gods, Ghosts, and Goblins: Understanding Belief*, I'm a social scientist and instruct my students in the ways of science. I welcome students' opinions, and we openly discuss the many factors that shape our views and beliefs, such as our upbringings, experiences, and faith or lack thereof. In all assignments and in class, I share how science relies on empirical evidence and a system of checks and balances. So it came as a surprise when, for an essay on people's belief in the spirit world, a student—let's call them X—turned in a paper lacking any citations whatsoever and opining about rampant demonic possession and conspiracy theories. The paper received a borderline failing grade, and the student was irate. At first, I could not understand where their angst came from. Then I realized that my instructions may not have been clear enough.

There are many reasons our instructions should be clear. First and foremost is the reality that when we don't know how to complete a task, or even how to begin, we get anxious. Not knowing what is expected of us and when constitutes a major form of stress. When humans lack information, we also experience a lack of control. In fact, although we've all heard that providing social support is a good thing, the type of support you provide needs to match the type of support a student needs. If a student is stressed out by not knowing how to complete an assignment, the best form of support for them is informational support—that is, information on how to do so. Giving them emotional support might mitigate their stress, but it won't address the real issue.

Giving clear instructions provides informational support in advance, and that support starts with the syllabus. The syllabus has many functions, one of which is to set out unambiguous expectations for students (Richmond et al., 2016). A well-written syllabus, especially a learner-centered one, can alleviate stress and set the

stage for effective learning. A look at the syllabus should tell a student what the assignments are, what they're supposed to read and when, and how many assessments there are and how much each is worth. Provided they take the time to read it in detail, the syllabus should answer all their questions. Students who understand exactly where they need to apply their efforts and what they must do to succeed, whether for class projects, papers, tests, or even classroom behavior, report better experiences than those who lack that understanding.

Clear instructions also make grading easier. Taking pains to ensure that the instructions for our assignments will correctly guide students is critical. Sometimes we may be tempted to be fast and loose with instructions, almost expecting our students to know what's in our heads, justified by the assumption that students should know to pay heed to what we say about the assignment in class. But just because we repeatedly say something in class doesn't mean we shouldn't list it explicitly in our instructions. Likewise, just because we assume that students should know to carry certain practices forward from assignment to assignment shouldn't dissuade us from making that expectation explicit. When I expected X, the student in my example, to cite their peer-reviewed source in a paper, it was because I had talked about how, when writing in science, one always cites credible sources. I had spent class time outlining what credible sources were and repeated this information explicitly in the instructions for the first paper of the term. In later assignments, I'd left that information out. I was not clear.

Where clear assignment instructions make expectations explicit, a well-crafted rubric eliminates confusion about grading criteria. If you will grade down for single spacing, be direct about it. If you want MLA style, put it in there. If a good paper should have five references, say so. If you do not want students to use non-peer-reviewed sources, say so. In fact, a good rubric will allow you to separate the wheat from the generative AI chaff. I often run my instructions through AI and then use my rubric to see what the grade is; unless I give the bot my rubric as well, the AI essay doesn't do well. Rubrics provide informational support also guide your students as to how to build their learning. Rubrics also serve to justify the grade given and provide a guiding benchmark to help you be more objective. Especially in classes like my belief class, it is easy let personal opinions, whether students' or mine, factor in. A clear rubric mitigates this problem.

Clarity can hence serve many different purposes. It can reduce student stress, help you be more objective, and make it easier to resolve grading issues. X, the student, who wrote the belief essay and I had a respectful face-to-face conversation. I realized my rubric and instructions were missing details. I pointed out specific edits to improve the paper. The student realized they had made some errors too. In a world of stress and many strongly held personal beliefs, being clear may be an important pedagogical tool to use that can alleviate the potential of discomfort and foster effective learning.

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