

## Guidelines for Writing Assessment Briefs

### Introduction:

The following notes will prompt you to consider the overall design and structure of your assessment brief however, the level of study will influence your design decisions. Students transitioning to higher education are likely to need a greater degree of scaffolding and as students' progress, they will practise and develop academic skills as tasks become more complex. At higher levels of study, there may be an expectation for students to be more autonomous when interpreting assessment briefs. This is certainly true for tasks, or components of a task which are already familiar to students but certain assessment tasks may be new to students at this stage too. Providing clarity within a brief will prevent students from wasting time trying to interpret task requirements, and will reduce your workload as you won't have to explain the task over and over again.

If your aim is to not be explicit within your instructions, then make students aware that this is your intention. If something is not made explicit then this is because you will be expecting students to work this out for themselves. This approach will depend on your learning outcomes, assessment rationale and level of study.

### Why invest time designing your assessment brief?

A good brief will narrow the gap between staff expectations and student performance.

A good brief should enable full understanding of what is required and expected in task performances.

A good brief will maximise inclusivity and will reduce the time students spend working out and confirming assessment requirements.

A good brief will promote constructive dialogue between staff and students.

A good brief won't spoon feed students and will be designed appropriately and according to students' stage of academic and assessment literacy development.

A good brief should not restrict student creativity nor hinder development of their independence.

## ASSESSMENT BRIEF DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS:

### TASK:

- Assessment type/task – the final written, edited or performed product of an assessment e.g. ‘research proposal’, aligned to the module learning outcomes
- Explicitness of brief – the extent to which the assessment requirements and expectations are spelled out in the brief

### DESIGN:

- Layout of brief – the organisation and formatting of the brief
- Language used – i.e. vocabulary, expressions, grammatical structure, style
- Consistency – consistent use of language and terminology within the brief

### ENHANCEMENT:

- Delivery – ways of ensuring that the conditions under which the brief is communicated is optimal
- Dialogue – ways of ensuring that dialogue between and amongst students and staff about the assessment is as constructive as possible
- Monitoring – the ongoing process of improving the effectiveness of a brief

## ASSESSMENT TYPE/TASK

### TASK:

#### **What is the specific nature of the task?**

Assessment types are diverse and can also vary across disciplines. There may not be a commonly understood term to refer to each type so the more information provided in the brief the better, especially if tasks are complex or multi-faceted.

#### **Who is the audience for this task?**

Ok, it’s you as the marker but assessment tasks will often have a target audience in mind e.g. the public, the academic community, management, clients etc. The audience will influence the style of communication, language used and the overall design of the task so make this explicit.

### **What is the role of the student-author?**

The default is the traditional student role however, some tasks may require the student to take on a specific role e.g. environmental consultant, healthcare professional, brand management expert, etc. and again, this role will influence how a student approaches the task and the overall design and language used.

### **Are sub-sections required?**

You may wish to be explicit about the overall structure of the task as in the number of sub sections or themes it includes. Should section headings be clearly defined within the brief? You might find that this approach is overly prescriptive though and that students should be able to work out appropriate section themes themselves. The stage of study may influence your design decisions.

### **Do task requirements aligned with conventional structures or do they differ?**

Students might have a pre-conceived idea about the structure of an assessment task based on previous experience or on common conventions across the sector. Your assessment task might deviate from 'the norm' so for example, you might expect sub-headings, charts and graphs within an 'essay' which are not typical features of a traditional essay. These structural requirements will need to be made clear.

## **EXPLICITNESS:**

### **Will students be familiar with the proposed task already?**

As mentioned, increase the level of support in the brief in line with the level of student familiarity with the task(s). This approach will enhance inclusivity by supporting all students including students from an academic culture where the assessment task is less commonly encountered. A brief can also include signposting to other sources of guidance (e.g. guidance on referencing, or exemplars).

### **What is the purpose of the assessment task?**

Be explicit about why the student is being asked to undertake the assessment task. What is the overall aim and rationale? How does the task align to the learning outcome(s) of the module? How does it align with or prepare them for the workplace, research or the next level of study?

### **How much direction and scaffolding are you offering?**

Offering students' choice is viewed as a positive design element, to encourage ownership and engagement. However, ambiguous open-ended tasks e.g. 'use any format, any length as long as it answers the question' can result in high levels of anxiety. Give serious consideration to the use of open-ended tasks and student choice and determine whether previously completed tasks have sufficiently prepared students for this level of autonomy. The aims of the task should be considered to ensure that the format of submitted work does not influence judgement. Marking criteria should also be reviewed to ensure that a specific format is not advantaged.

In some contexts, you might wish to break down an assessment task into its component parts. A research proposal is a good example as this typically follows a well-defined format. The component parts or sequence of stages should be stated explicitly in the brief.

**Are you explicit about the academic activity, linked to the module learning outcome?**

Your assessment will be aligned to a module learning outcome(s) which include active verbs such as 'identify', 'critically evaluate', 'justify' etc. Your assessment brief will include the same terms as this activity is what you are setting out to measure, within a given context. The inclusion of such terms will clarify the assessment functions that students are expected to perform and the corresponding discourse style.

**Are students aware of the place of theory within the task and the type and extent of research?**

Consider whether you wish to signpost students to key theoretical frameworks for their task. From a strategic point of view, if you prompt students to 'refer to at least two of the theoretical frameworks that were covered during the semester', then students will be very likely to engage with class discussions around those frameworks. Nevertheless, the stage of learning will influence your design choice as you may expect students to locate theoretical frameworks on their own as they progress through a programme of study.

You may also give consideration to the type of resources students are expected to use. For example, if secondary research is required then this should be made clear. Avoid generic statements such as: 'it is expected you will employ a wide range of sources'. How long is a piece of string? Instead, indicate the minimum number of sources that are required, giving guidance on the nature of those sources, e.g. book chapters, journal articles, datasets, reports etc.

**Are referencing methods and word count (equivalence) stipulated?**

State the referencing style required and clarify whether a bibliography and or reference list should be included. It's useful to signpost/hyperlink to [existing guides](#).

Be explicit about word count requirements and what should be included or excluded from this count. If an assessment task includes multiple sections then you might consider indicating the proportion of word count per section. Similarly, timings for e.g. performances or the scale of created artefacts should be defined if and where appropriate. Penalties for exceeding the word count or equivalence should also be evident within the brief.

**For a staged or patchwork assessment, is there a proposed timeline for each stage?**

Consider whether the assessment has a complex set of sub tasks or stages which contribute to the next. If so, include a timeline for the assessment stages, preferably in diagram form.

**Do students need to be referred to other sources for guidance?**

If full guidance cannot be included within a written brief then state how students can develop their understanding further. This might be via the associate marking criteria or could be through opportunities for staff-student or student-student dialogue or formative activity. Where this dialogue or activity is necessary, indicate how, when and where this takes place.

## DESIGN:

### LAYOUT:

#### **Have you assembled instructions in a structured way?**

If key components of the assessment task are scattered randomly through a brief then chances are students could miss something crucial. Instructions should be assembled in distinct sub-sections. Make sure that the constituents of a brief are ordered in a logical way e.g. title, core task, rationale and learning outcomes, task requirements, word count equivalence, assessment criteria, submission details, deadline.

Make use of formatting and font tools (bold, italics etc.) to emphasise key elements of the task. This helps students to prioritise these elements before processing other information.

#### **Is the core assessment task clearly defined?**

Include a concise statement of the core task at the beginning of the brief. The task can then be processed quickly before the student moves on to more in-depth guidance.

#### **Does the brief mirror the expected sequence of the task?**

Consider, depending on the complexity of the task, sequencing the written instructions so that they mirror the stages the student will go through when doing the assessment. This might sound obvious but is particularly important with highly complex tasks with numerous stages involved. A visual flow chart could be useful for example.

#### **Is your brief readable and the appropriate length?**

You'll need to strike a balance between giving enough guidance without overloading with too much information, which can be difficult to process. Minimise non-essential information and make good use of horizontal spacing between headings, main sections and sub-sections, and use this consistently.

Visuals can be really effective in conveying information, to help clarify or contextualise the assessment task components and how they pull together as a whole. Alternatively, a multimedia presentation with voice-over can be an efficient way to explain assessment tasks.

For further guidance on making documents accessible, take a look at guides such as [Best practices for creating accessible documents](#) at Lynda.com

### LANGUAGE:

#### **Is the language of the brief clear and simple?**

Use Plain English (<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html>) to make briefs straightforward and easy to interpret. Avoid overly long sentences and avoid double negatives. Avoid complex, overly academic language. Keep the brief simple (unless your learning outcome is to be able to interpret complex assessment briefs!).

Don't cram too much information into one sentence e.g. 'you are required to submit the essay, relating a theoretical discussion of a concept or author studied on the course, drawing on scholarly sources (2,500

words plus/minus 10%, excluding bibliography in week 11.’ Instead, use a separate sentence for each constituent of the assessment task.

### **Are you making assumptions about certain activities?**

Your assessment brief will outline expectations about the quality of work. It might include phrases such as ‘quality sources’, ‘sound argument’, ‘robust treatment’, coherent description, etc. Such phrases may need unpacking and restated in different ways. Alternatively, students could be signposted to where they can clarify their intended meaning.

### **Is there too much jargon in the brief?**

Avoid words and expressions that students might be less familiar with. Academic jargon and the use of rarely used words e.g. ‘obfuscate’, ‘concretise’ etc. will just cloud understanding of the actual task at hand.

Consider if it is appropriate to use concepts requiring culturally specific knowledge not necessarily shared by all student groups e.g. terms like ‘Orwellian’, or ‘Fat cats’. This will reduce inclusivity. Of course, this might be unavoidable if such concepts are a theme within the module and explained.

Avoid idioms e.g. ‘in a nutshell’ or Latin terms e.g. ‘sine qua non’ as students may be unfamiliar with such terms.

### **Does your brief encourage the development of assessment literacy?**

Assessment literacy – understanding the process of making academic judgments, how this may be achieved and the benefits and limitations of different approaches (Jisc). Although general academic jargon (academese) should be avoided, do make use of frequently used assessment terminology e.g. ‘weighting’, ‘feedback’, ‘feedforward’, ‘exemplar’ as this will help students’ assessment literacy development. Similarly, define and make use of research terminology e.g. ‘evidence based’, ‘validity’ to develop assessment literacy, particularly at the early stages of study.

### **Is the tone of the brief positive?**

Try to avoid using a tone that could trigger a negative response in some students. Imperatives such as ‘do’, ‘don’t’, ‘DO NOT’ and the overuse of ‘you will’, ‘you must’ could provoke negativity and disengagement with the task. Language that stresses the difficulty of a task or the high-stakes nature of the task could also cause anxiety or a strategic approach to ‘play it safe’.

## **CONSISTENCY:**

### **Is the title clear and consistent?**

Identify the assessment task with a formal and specific title and use this consistently within the brief and during communication about the task. Students will be juggling a number of assessments and so having a number of assessments named ‘assignment 1’ could cause confusion.

### **Is reference to the assessment type consistent?**

Aim to be consistent in the term used to refer to the specific assessment task. Switching between terms such as ‘reflective commentary’ and ‘learning log’ could cause confusion as they suggest two different discourse types. This can lead to time wasted in seeking clarity. Switching between general terms such as ‘assessment’, ‘assignment’ or ‘coursework’ could also cause confusion.

Similarly, be consistent in the use of subject discipline terms and avoid using multiple terms to refer to the same concepts. This vocabulary should be shared across the programme team. The development of a shared understanding of key concepts will help to ensure consistency in the team's use of terms.

The vocabulary and terminology used should be consistent across all elements of the assessment including learning outcomes, the assessment brief, the marking criteria and feedback forms.

## ENHANCEMENT

### DELIVERY:

#### **Is there consistency in the formatting of assessments?**

Aim to use the same, or parallel set of formats for briefs across a module, programme or School.

#### **Has the brief been proof-read?**

Test the brief on a colleague, perhaps from a different subject area, and ask them to comment on whether they understand what is expected from the task. A subject expert and/or author of the brief could overlook areas that could lead to misunderstandings from a student audience. Alternatively, you might be able to access a group of previous students to evaluate your brief.

#### **Can students easily access assessment resources?**

Aim to have all documents and resources associated with the assessment such as, the brief, marking criteria, exemplars, and coversheets (if appropriate) stored together in an assessment section of the module BBL site.

#### **Do you revisit the assessment task during module delivery?**

Assessment briefings are often delivered at the beginning of a module, but aim to build in regular slots for dialogue about the assessment. Students should also be clear about how formative tasks are aligned to the summative assessment.

#### **Is there scope to use exemplars?**

Consider providing access to exemplars to help students contextualise instructions. This is particularly useful for unfamiliar assessments. Although exemplars of full assessment scripts/artefacts could lead to plagiarism, sharing structural templates or focussed samples of e.g. critical reflection or analysis or other threshold concepts can help provide clarity whilst minimising plagiarism.

### DIALOGUE:

#### **Are there opportunities to discuss the brief?**

The assessment is a critical component of module design so assessment briefing sessions will be designed into the curriculum. These can also be supplemented with guidance on Blackboard (e.g. a multimedia brief or a Q&A resource), or with an online discussion forum. Some students might be

reticent to ask questions in class but may feel confident to ask questions online. Ensure that details of how to access these opportunities are stated within the brief.

### **Is indexing used effectively?**

Use a naming, numbering or similar indexing system for sub-sections of briefs to facilitate reference to these when communicating to students about the assessment.

### **MONITORING:**

#### **Can you gauge student understanding of assessment requirements?**

Providing a formal system for queries about the assessment, with responses accessible by the whole group will help you identify common misunderstandings and potential barriers to student success. This could be a scheduled Q&A in class or in an online forum. Methods for keeping this anonymous will encourage wider student engagement e.g. using personal response systems and setting anonymous responses. Scheduling Q&A sessions and sharing commonly asked questions with the whole group should reduce the number of tutorials you have to deliver where you repeatedly explain the same concepts to different students. Additionally, schedule opportunities for facilitated peer review to enable pairs or small groups to interpret the brief and identify areas needing further clarification.

By collating a record of the assessment queries, and the responses, you can use this to design out the less effective features of the brief. If they can't be designed out then add the issues to a list of FAQs.

#### **Are you monitoring student performance and student feedback?**

Aim to collate common areas of poor performance over time to determine whether these can be attributed to the brief. Additionally, review recurring feedback comments from students, relating to the assessment, and also from external examiners. Re-design the instructions accordingly to check this possibility.

**Final note:** *it's good practice to share assessment briefs with colleagues in programme teams prior to launch. This can be an opportunity for peer review to check the overall clarity of briefs and to check consistency in quality/support across the programme.*