

## **Written Work Tip Sheet**

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HKS faculty members utilize a broad range of written assignments to build skills and assess progress towards mastery.

### **Determine Your Teaching Goals**

Is your primary objective to test students' ability to synthesize complex material? To challenge them to write a persuasive policy position memo to a highly placed decision-maker? To address a complex challenge to a government or nonprofit client? To create a professional consulting report? Or, to sway public opinion via a publishable op-ed piece? Obviously, each of these choices involves different criteria for evaluation.

### **Communicate Expectations and Evaluation Criteria**

Make sure the syllabus indicates the number and general type of all written assignments. It's fine to distribute more detailed assignment descriptions in the course of the semester, but be sure to give overview of expectations at the start of the semester before students choose their courses. Try to offer relevant criteria for each assignment type. For example, an op-ed needs to be concise, clear, and engaging. A research paper should prove a hypothesis with quantitative or qualitative data, resolve some policy question, or add to knowledge in the field. A decision memo needs to be carefully formatted, demonstrate a clear analytic framework, and support its key recommendations with relevant data. When you do distribute more detailed assignment descriptions, include the criteria by which the assignment will be graded.

### **Timing and Clarity**

Allow adequate lead time. Write a clear description of the assignment that answers most student questions about what is expected. This means being clear about the criteria for excellence in each case, the length, the formatting, the context if applicable, the date and place due, the penalties for late papers, etc.

### **Consider Offering Choices**

It might be a good idea to let students choose which type of written work they would most like to tackle — e.g., a memo or an op-ed or a short research paper. In this case, you would need to suggest criteria for each format.

### **Offer Feedback**

In addition to marginal comments and questions, a summary statement should try to touch upon the most important criteria. Offer feedback on assignments that flow from the assessment criteria and that give the learner guidance as to what precisely to do differently next time. It may help to share 1-2 strong examples of a completed assignment to model replicable tactics. Finally, feedback should be provided in advance of the next assignment so that students can act on it in their next attempt to improve.

### **Course Assistants or Teaching Fellows**

Clarify in advance the role of CAs or TFs in advising students in the writing process and in reading the assignments. CAs should not be grading papers, but they can do a first read of assignments with a rubric and useful comments to establish a grade range.

### **Establish Reasonable Expectations for International Students**

Recognize that some international students will not write in perfect English. Be clear about whether you expect them to get help perfecting their grammar—or are you willing to try to grade on the basis of the ideas beneath the less-than-perfect English? (Notify the relevant Program Directors if you find students whose English is too weak to allow them to express their ideas in a way you can understand.)