# **TILT: Frequently Asked Questions**

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In the videos for UAA, we looked at the research surrounding the Transparency in Learning and Teaching Project, the TILT Project, and talked about why transparent assignment design is an equitable teaching practice that levels the playing field for our at risk students who may be underprepared for coursework or first generation students who may not realize our expectations or strategies that they can incorporate for success. As we discussed, we know that transparent assignment design helps these students in a statistically significant way AND helps ALL students to understand why they are being asked to complete work (the purpose), how they should go about it (the task), and how they will be evaluated (the criteria). This purpose-task-criteria is the foundation of transparent assignment design.

In this document, I will address several of the commonly asked questions about TILT that we did not address in the videos.

## What do you do BEFORE you give your students a transparent assignment?

Let’s start with transparent teaching:An important final step in offering transparency around academic assignments suggests that faculty offer their students transparency about transparency, and to seek out the expertise of the students themselves. Sharing the rationale behind any evidence-based teaching strategy can enhance students' metacognitive awareness while increasing their attention to monitoring their own learning process. Simply telling students clearly about the anticipated learning goals deprives them of this metacognitive preparation. We have discovered that students may be the best experts on how to make an assignment transparent to them. But how do you do this?

**Have a discussion with students about the assignment.** Some faculty don’t even give students the assignment until they’ve talked about it first using the purpose-task-criteria model. The written assignment “backs up” the discussion. Teachers who provide both written instructions and a discussion actually provide greater access to students who might have missed that one class discussion about the assignment, or who would benefit from seeing the purpose-task-criteria framework for their work in written form. So your job with transparent teaching is to “SET UP” the assignment and involve your students. Maybe you do this through questions (*What kind of resources might you use? What do you think I’m asking you do to? Why do you think this is important? Where do you plan to start?)* You probably already do this any time you talk about an assignment. We found in our initial TILT studies that teachers continue to revise their already transparent assignments as they work with new groups of students who offer different questions and insights.

## Is there such a thing as too much transparency?

While transparency can help students, too much transparency may be unnecessary or overwhelming. You can adjust the amount of detail, providing less information about purposes and criteria for introductory students and more for advanced students. For introductory students, a full rubric with multiple columns and rows may offer more detail about criteria than students need or understand. A simple checklist and an opportunity to discuss and apply the criteria to examples of work may provide enough help. Introductory students may benefit from a more detailed description of tasks, while upper level or graduate students need less detailed guidance on each step to be taken and more information about criteria.  **Teachers tend to offer less detail about purposes, tasks and criteria for low-stakes assignments and in-class exercises, while they offer more purpose-task-criteria information about final projects and other high-stakes work that can substantially affect a student's course grade.**

## What about content coverage!?

One faculty member noticed that the redesign doubled the size of the lesson, which necessitated cutting some other material, but that “students learned the topic more deeply.” We’ve heard faculty lament their need to cover content in response to active learning techniques and it can be true that time spent in interactive, student-centered teaching can reduce the amount of content that can be covered.

Perhaps a different way to think about this is to suggest that TILT lines up with the science of learning research and offers a way for faculty to align teaching practices with what we know about how learning works. Just as an example – we know that experts think differently than novices with their organizing principles. So faculty can see the purpose/task/criteria of assignments clearly. But students are often unaware of these until we explicitly point them out. When we give students transparent assignments, we reduce the demand on working memory so students can focus on thinking deeply about the assignment, rather than devoting resources to interpreting our intents or wondering why they been asked to do the work/how it relates to course content. Will you lose some time that might otherwise be devoted to rapid course coverage? Yes. But are your students more likely to *uncover* content and connect with your expectations? Yes.

## Will students read a longer (more transparent) assignment?

If you revise an assignment, will it be longer? Probably. Will students read it? Yes and no. It seems like a universal complaint among faculty is that their students don’t read. So if my assignment is longer, aren’t I taking a risk? Here’s the thing: Transparent assignment design doesn’t work by itself. You can’t “fix” an assignment and assume that because it is redesigned, it will automatically result in better outcomes. Transparent assignment design must be paired with transparent teaching methods. Some students will follow verbal directions with more attention, while other students will read longer directions with more effectiveness, perhaps even more so after they’ve heard the directions.

Some instructors have noted a desire to stay more concise using the framework without diminishing clarity of instructions or the overall transparency of the assignment. What we noticed is that instructors who adopted the TILT framework began to own it; in other words, they fine-tuned the approach to fit their own teaching practices – perhaps making the instructions more concise, maybe making a list of items under the purpose section shorter, or starting with the task (and then the purpose) because they found that it help the students’ attention.

## Spoonfeeding

One common concern for some instructors is whether transparency about the task might be *too* helpful to students, making it too easy for them to complete their assignments. Does it coddle students and reduce their motivation to excel? Published reflections from faculty who shared such concerns indicated that the quality of students’ work was higher than they anticipated or that students met the teachers’ goals quickly, leaving time for more challenging work and greater achievement by the end of the term.

We might also note that if your faculty colleagues suggest that students need to work through/struggle through the purpose instead of having it laid out for them, in other words, that discovering the purpose of the assignment is a part of the assignment – then, we encourage them to say just that (*the purpose of this assignment is for you to work through challenges and perhaps even experience frustration as you identify XYZ*).

## Doesn’t this take quite a bit of extra time?

Teachers may be reticent to take on a substantial redesign of assignments they feel they have perfected. A major concern that many instructors might have about implementing the Transparency Framework is the time and effort involved in the development process. It is true that developing and articulating the purpose, task and criteria components of an assignment takes some time.

But it’s important to remember the mantra of TILT here, which is: **Small changes lead to big improvements.** We always encourage our faculty to start by revising one or just two assignments in a course. The good news is that although our faculty admitted that some extra time was involved on the front end, they all felt the payoff was much greater, resulting in less confusion and improved performance from their students, ultimately saving time in the end for both students and instructors.

## Conclusion:

It is important to recognize that a relatively small amount of transparent instruction can offer significant benefits for students. You do not need to revise every syllabus, in-class activity or assignment to reap those gains. In our AAC&U and UNLV studies, we asked teachers to revise only two assignments in a term to make them more transparent, relevant and accessible for students. That was enough to provide students with significant increases to their confidence, sense of belonging, metacognitive awareness, and retention up to two years later, with even larger gains for underserved students. Two discussions in a term about the purposes, tasks and criteria for their academic work can prepare students to seek out transparency in other assignments and in other courses.

For assistance in designing assignments, learning exercises and course materials that offer transparency equitably to students, consult the guidelines in our book and the multiple examples available on the [TILT Higher Ed website](http://www.tilthighered.org/).