GIVING DIRECTIONS FOR INDEPENDENT WORK in remote/online settings

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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This material has been created to provide teachers at all levels with a resource to inform the design of aspects of their remote/ online teaching that call for giving directions for students' independent work. While some of the insights and considerations included in this document are specific to remote/ online settings, most are more general and applicable to face-to-face learning contexts as well.

Please note that the considerations and options identified here are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather are offered as a starting point. Therefore, we invite you to "personalize" the analysis provided here by adding your own insights as well as eliminating options less relevant to you and substituting them with new ones you have identified as more valuable for your context. You can capture these changes by downloading and editing this Word file – as this is an open source document you are allowed to use and modify, provided you cite its original source.

The best way to get better at this practice, though, is to be aware of the decisions you make when implementing it and their implications. To help you keep track of and reflect on your instructional decisions when "Giving Directions for Independent Work", on our webpage you can find a template to structure a Reflective Journal specific to this practice.

Introduction

Students cannot engage effectively in independent work unless they understand what they are expected to do and why. While this is true in face-to-face classes as well, giving directions for remote independent work is even more critical and can present additional challenges – as, for one, students will not be able to immediately ask clarifying questions. Therefore, special care has to be given to crafting and communicating directions in ways that are clear and accessible for all students.

Potential benefits of *Giving Directions* we want to maximize

- Ensuring that students know what they are supposed to do for their independent work
- Ensuring that students do not give up on a task because they do not understand or remember the directions

Potential challenges (and how they may be reduced)

- Students may need to review the directions at different points in time as they start engaging in specific tasks
  - *Provide written directions, posted in easy-to-find locations*
  - *If you give oral directions, make sure you record them and post the recording in easy-to-find locations*
- Students may not always fully understand the directions when given:
  - *Provide multiple opportunities to ask clarifying questions – and answer those questions timely*
- Students may feel confused and overwhelmed by long written or oral directions for complex long-term tasks:
  - *Provide an accompany summary/ checklist*
  - *Warn students in advance about long directions, and explain rationale*
  - *Set intermediate deadlines for specific components of the work*
- Keep in mind that not everyone approaches learning the same way, and different students may prefer to receive directions in different ways

Other things to consider

- When possible, providing rubrics and "models" of past student work can eliminate the need for most questions
- Checklists with clear deadlines are especially useful when multiple tasks are assigned; adding a summary checklist by deadline can also be helpful in this case
- Using a consistent format within the same course can be very helpful
- Early on in a course, there may be more need for detailed written directions – after that, directions could be shorter

Key instructional decisions to be made – *along with possible options and their pros & cons*

FORMAT:

Option:	*Advantages*	*Limitations*
Oral-live	• Teacher can immediately adapt the explanation if there seems to be some confusion • Students' requests for clarification can be immediately addressed • Some students prefer oral directions • Takes the least preparation time for the teacher	• Unless there are accompanying written directions, students may forget the given directions by the time they start working on the task • It takes up precious class/synch time
Oral-recorded	• Some students prefer oral directions • Provides a record that can be revisited as needed • It saves precious class/synch time	• Does not allow for immediate clarifications • Takes teacher's time to pre-record directions • Students may need to review the entire video to find a specific piece of information they are looking for
Written	• Provides a record that can be most easily revisited as needed (especially when needing to find specific pieces of information) • Some students prefer written directions they can highlight and annotate • It saves precious class/synch time	• Does not allow for immediate clarifications • Some students have difficulty processing long written directions • Takes teacher's time to write clear and detailed directions
Written with hyperlinks	• Provides a record that can be most easily revisited as needed (especially when needing to find specific pieces of information) • Allows to break down directions at different levels (i.e., "big picture" only, with links to more detailed directions for specific assignments) • Can be linked to other online materials to be used • It saves precious class/synch time	• Does not allow for immediate clarifications • Takes teacher's time to write clear directions at different levels of detail • Some students may forget to click for more detailed directions and miss some important specs

Level of DETAILS:

Option:	*Advantages*	*Limitations*
Minimal	• Doesn't overwhelm students • Provides room for choice/ creativity	• Students may interpret the task differently, and not do what you expected them to do
Detailed	• Provides all the information students need to engage in the task as intended	• May feel overwhelming and off-putting for some students
Rubrics provided	• Provides information about specific expectations for the final product • Provides a checklist to use for self-evaluation	• By itself, it may not be enough to articulate what students need to do to complete the task
Models provided	• Provides an image of what the final product should look like	• May have the unintended consequence of pushing students towards a specific solution/ format at the exclusion of other possibilities • By itself, may not be enough to articulate what students need to do to complete the task

Opportunities for CLARIFICATIONS:

Option:	*Advantages*	*Limitations*
None	• Saves teacher's time!	• Students who do not understand a piece of the directions may not engage in the task as intended • Students may give up and not to engage in the task if they do not understand the directions
In the moment	• It allows the teacher to address requests for clarifications immediately	• Possible only within a synch session • Students may realize only later, when they attempt the task, that they have questions
Email teacher	• Questions can be asked when needed • If the teacher checks email regularly, it will receive a timely response • Teacher can respond to questions individually • Student may be more willing to ask questions privately	• Teacher may not respond immediately • Other students may not benefit from the clarification, unless the teacher decides to send an email to the whole class about that issue
Online "Ask a Question"	• Questions can be asked when needed • Teacher can respond to questions publicly – thus benefiting other students • Students can check if their question has already been responded to (saving teacher's time)	• Requires an online repository for these questions (dedicated discussion board in a LMS, or Padlet) • Questions may not be answered timely it the teacher forgets to check the site regularly (unless notifications are set up)

Useful online tools

- **Learning Management Systems** (LMS): Learning Management Systems (such as Schoology, Google Classrooms, Canvas, Blackboard) can play a key role as the place where directions are stored and readily accessible to students. The directions stored could be in the form of either be written text or recorded oral presentations; hyperlinks could be used in any written direction to give access to specific materials and/ or more detailed directions for specific tasks.

- **"Sharing" apps:** Even if your institution has not invested in a Learning Management System, you could use stand-alone apps (such as *Padlet* and *Flipgrid*) as a means to post directions for specific tasks, along with links to specific materials to be used and/or more detailed directions for specific tasks.

- **Platforms allowing for synchronous sessions:** Platforms like *Zoom* or *Google Meet* allow teachers to give live oral directions to their students – thus allowing students to ask for clarifications in the moment. As these presentations can be easily recorded, they could also be posted and made available to students for future reference as needed.

- **Video-recording tools:** Any video-recording tool – including those built into any synchronous session platform - could be used to pre-record teacher's oral directions, so they can be posted and made available to students as needed.

- **Email:** Email can provide the simplest method for students to ask clarifying questions about directions from the teacher and receive timely responses. Most Learning Management Systems provide systems for students and teacher to email each other without having to reveal personal email addresses.

Options worth considering
(S=synchronous session or F2F; A=asynchronous online or regular homework):

Option:	Considerations	A	S	Useful online tools
A. Providing minimal live oral directions, accompanied by written directions	• May help set expectations for students without overwhelming them or taking too much class/synch time • May allow the teacher to more easily explain the rationale/goals and identify priorities • Students can be alerted to look at the more detailed written directions as a reference when they engage in the task • Oral directions may be more engaging and less off-putting for some students		X	• Synch session • Online repository for the written directions

B. *Providing pre-recorded oral directions, with slides*	• Oral directions may be more engaging and less off-putting for some students • May allow the teacher to more easily explain the rationale/goals and identify priorities • Provides a record students can revisit as needed • Slides can be quickly reviewed to get to the point of interest	X		• Video-recording tools • Powerpoint	
C. *Providing detailed online written directions with links*	• Provides an easy to access record students can revisit as needed • Best way to follow directions that require access to specific materials (which could be directly linked to the directions) • May enable the teacher to provide different "levels" of directions (ex: general directions in a main document, with link providing more details and links to materials for each specific task) • May be easier to process for some students • Students may forgot to click and review the more detailed directions	X	*	• Online repository	
D. *Providing models of what students need to do*	• Best way to give students an image of a complex product they are expected to create, and a sense of expectations in terms of scope and quality • Best if more than one model is provided, so students know there is not just one way to do the assigned task • Needs to be accompanied by some written or oral directions about the task	X	*	• Online repository	

Key tips

1. Make sure there is a record of the directions that students can revisit as needed
2. When possible, provide directions both orally and in writing to meet different preferences
3. Students may feel confused and overwhelmed by long written or oral directions for complex long-term tasks – so figure out ways to simplify and organize those directions
4. Providing models can be helpful - as long as they do not give too much away!
5. Whenever there are multiple deadlines, include an additional checklist by deadline
6. Use a consistent format overtime
7. Directions that may seem crystal clear to you, may not be so for everyone else – so make sure students know how to ask for clarification and get a timely response
8. Make sure students know how to ask for clarifications and provide them with a timely response