

Listen. Think. Ask. Do.

A Public Relations Course Assignment Designed to Stimulate and Assess Students' Ability to Follow Verbal Instructions

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Rationale

An often expressed complaint from supervisors is that many employees struggle with following verbal instructions. This dilemma is also felt by professors. Despite having instructions available on course management systems, sometimes students fail to do what is directed. When given verbally, completion success is even less. As communication educators, we need to encourage students to develop the ability to follow verbal instructions since they will need that skill when they enter the public relations field.

Description

One solution to addressing this gap is an assignment that requires students to complete a multi-step task (similar to what they will encounter in the workplace) with only verbal instructions. It is composed of the following:

- ***Listen to the instructions.***
- ***Think about the task you are instructed to complete.***
- ***Ask questions required to complete the directed task.***
- ***Do the task -- sans any written directions.***

Nothing is written. All of the instructions are verbal. Students are responsible for seeking all of the information required to complete the task. Once the instructions are given, no further assistance is provided.

Student Learning Goals

- Enhance listening skills.
- Assess types of questions needed to ask to complete a task.
- Develop critical thinking and research skills.
- Complete a task with only verbal instructions provided.
- Recognize the value of following verbal instructions.

Assignment Explanation

As faculty, we are advised (and possibly required) to use course management systems to communicate with our students and manage our classes. It is where we post assignments, grades, announcements, and other essential course information. While this helps keep everyone informed, the problem is that the world the students enter after college does not use a CMS. As employees, students are faced with the reality that tasks may be assigned verbally where they are required to listen attentively, ask appropriate questions, consider steps needed to complete the task and then complete it – often without anything written except the notes they themselves took.

The Verbal Instructions assignment is explained in the syllabus where it accounts for 10% of the course grade. The students know that they will be receiving the instructions on a date noted in the class schedule. After ensuring that there are no extra-curricular conflicts I find a date when all students are expected to be present. It is posted on Blackboard and in the outline so that they know that attendance is mandatory and that an unexcused absence will result in a grade of zero for the task. That hit on their course grade is a motivator to come to class!

On the day of the assignment, I give the backstory and rationale for the activity and then I simulate a verbally-instructed setting with things like staged disruptions and mind-blanks. This becomes an

engaging and fun activity as students banter off each other and seek to glean as much information as possible.

Instructions and Grading Components

This assignment is given in our introductory public relations course. The class is a prerequisite to the internship course so I use this assignment as way to get students doing advance work for that experience.

Here is an example of the activity instructions:

You are to research internship opportunities. Upon finding a suitable opportunity, you are to write an email requesting to be considered for an internship position. You don't have to actually apply for it but you are to send the email draft to me.

Be sure to:

- *Properly introduce yourself and the purpose of email.*
- *Use proper grammar and communicate clearly.*
- *Break up your points.*
- *Use a proper email subject line - Course title followed by "Verbal Instructions Assignment"*
- *Provide contact information.*
- *Attach a resume and include that fact in your email.*

For Blackboard submission you are to submit the email content as a Word doc. In the comments section you are to state why you chose the business/organization.

While explaining the assignment, I leave a few details out hoping they think to ask--specifically the due date and time. After the instructions are provided, students are asked if they have all they need to successfully complete the assignment. I remind them that I will not respond to any emails or answer additional questions after the instruction session has ended. (This often creates a nervous, comical dialogue as they ponder if they asked the right questions.) Students are aware that they are free to discuss the assignment amongst themselves but not seek information from me.

On Bb, the only information provided is where they are to upload their assignment.

The grading rubric consists of the following components:

____/70 Followed assignment instructions

____ *Instructions followed?*

____ */25 Deadlines met?*

____ */10 Requested information included the Comments section?*

____ */15 Properly uploaded in Blackboard?*

____ */20 Email instructions followed? (Subject line...resume attached)*

____/25 Structure and Format

____ *Was it proofed for grammar, AP adherence, flow, and sentence structure?*

____/5 Application Worthy

____ *With minor edits is this ready to use in a search for an internship?*

Results/ Reaction

At the end of the semester, students are asked what they liked/disliked about the course. This assignment is often praised with students saying they see the value of not having everything in writing. They also like that it helps them get started on the internship exploration process.

Additionally, this assignment is being studied using IRB protocols. Two semesters of data using a pre and post survey reveal that students are mixed on their own ability to complete the task, but

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consistently see the value of a verbally-instructed assignment. Data from an employer survey reveal that supervisors are concerned about employees' ability to follow verbal instructions and there is a need for verbally instructed assignments in higher education.