



# Assessment Briefs



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## Introduction

In [TESTA](#) exercises at the University of Strathclyde and elsewhere, it is common for students to report that they are often unsure about staff expectations around assessments, about what they need to do to pass or 'do well', and that this lack of clarity impacts their confidence and performance in these assessments.

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*"You just have no idea where you are going sometimes, you are just going in blind doing an assignment... it's a lot of guesswork. Maybe sometimes knowing the individual lecturer, knowing what they look for, makes it easier... but we shouldn't have to have that kind of knowledge."*

*Student, University of Strathclyde, 2021*

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In this week's Micro-CPD session, we would like to highlight the use of **clearer, more comprehensive, and consistent assessment briefs** as one way of addressing this issue at module and programme level.

## Assessment briefs

An assessment brief is a set of instructions which provides students with guidance on how to approach the task they are being asked to complete. You or your Department/School may not use the term assessment brief, but every assessment

your students undertake will have some form of instruction attached to it, so you are already familiar with the idea of an assessment briefing.

The question that students' feedback on this issue raises is not whether instruction is given, it's how clear, comprehensive, and consistent this instruction is across modules and programmes.

The aim of this Micro-CPD session is to prompt individuals, and, ideally programme teams, to think about whether purposefully adopting an 'assessment briefing' approach to providing instruction to students could be fruitful for them.

For students, the clarity and consistency this could bring could help them improve their confidence, performance and attainment. For staff, one of the knock-on effects of this shift could be fewer questions, concerns, and issues to address during assessment periods and more engaged and meaningful responses to assessment tasks.

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*"The appropriate design and development of assessment instructions is paramount to the positive experience of students with that assessment. Similarly, badly designed assessments can have a negative effect on the student experience, which can diffuse into students' lives and careers."*

[Brunton, J., Brown, M., Costello, E., & Walsh, E. \(2016\) Designing and developing a programme-focused assessment strategy: a case study, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 31:2, 176-](#)

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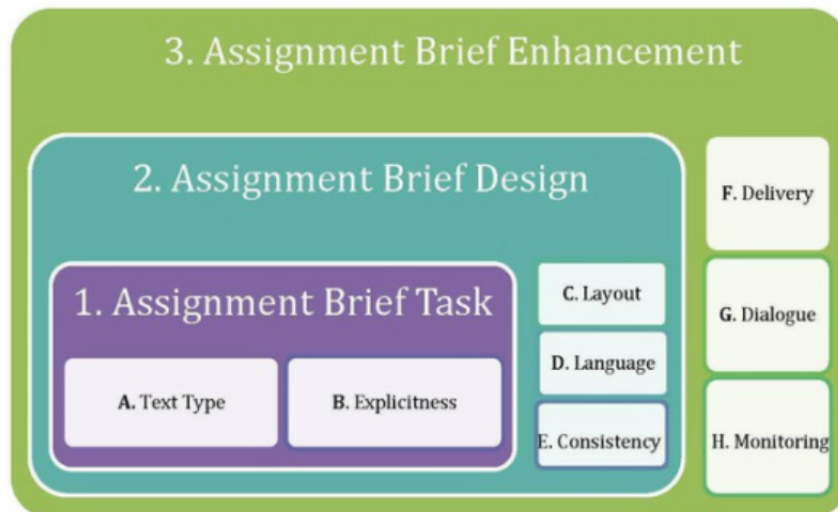
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## How can you take an assessment brief approach?

Luckily, a set of resources created as part of a Higher Education Academy (now AdvanceHE) and Oxford Brookes University project in 2014 can help us to answer

that question.

The [Assessment Brief Design](#) project sets out a series of guidelines and underlying principles, organised around three layers or phases, that help clarify what makes an effective assessment brief and, importantly, the ideal order of design and development. The graphic below, taken from the project website, captures the layers and the progression from element to element.



Graphic taken from Assessment Brief Design project website:  
<https://assignmentbriefdesign.weebly.com/organisation-of-guidelines.html>

Your **first concern** is to clearly describe the [task output](#) (e.g. type, audience, format, etc.) and be [explicit about standards and conventions](#) (e.g. word count, limitations, task direction, etc.). Here you are making sure that the students understand what they need to do to address the challenge of the task and what their submission will consist of. The use of [exemplars](#) might help with this.

The **next set of concerns** is around the layout of the brief (e.g. appearance, components, ordering, etc.), [how you express the instructions](#) (language, tone, jargon, etc.), and [how consistent](#) this brief is vis-a-vis others on the module and programme (e.g. naming conventions, criteria, etc.). The impact of the brief will depend on the extent to which the student is able to engage with and understand it, which will be distracted to some extent by the form it takes in its presentation. Thinking carefully about the language used, the order of instructions, the inclusion or exclusion of particular details, and so on, will make a big difference to the efficacy of the brief.

**Finally**, these briefs should be [delivered](#) in an effective way (e.g. thinking about when and how they are given to students, when they are referred to in teaching, etc.), considered in light of student [feedback](#) (e.g. gauging impact and

engagement through dialogue), and [monitored](#) over time with a view to improving them further (evaluation activities, identifying challenges, etc.). How and when the brief is delivered will matter. For example, the positive impact of the brief is likely to increase when colleagues can find time to introduce and discuss its contents during class, in direct conversation with their students. Like everything else, a good assessment brief will evolve, and the guidance from the Assessment Brief Design project is that this should be based on engagement with students and reflection.

The project resources offer a great deal of detailed guidance on how to approach each of these aspects of the assessment brief. (Helpfully, there is also an adapted version of these guidelines and principles, created by the University of Ulster available to download and use. The link for this is on the panel below.)

**Could you develop a clearer, more comprehensive, and more consistent approach to the design and use of assessment briefs in your teaching? Could you convince your Department/School to do the same across a programme? These are challenges but the impact could be significant for you and your students.**

**Let us know if you would like to do this and need some help to get started.**