

Assigning a Video Project

Video projects can be powerful learning tools for students: allowing them to rethink the way they use sources, reconsider how they think about the video around them and create persuasive visual arguments. However, they can also be frustrating for both students and instructors if students plan poorly, lack access to the resources, or are confused about the purpose of the assignment.

As you prepare your class, contact the Weigle Information Commons (<http://wic.library.upenn.edu/forfaculty.html>) for workshops, one-on one training, equipment, examples of other projects and more information about assigning video projects. If you are teaching a course in, or cross-listed in, the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), you should also contact Multi-Media services (http://www.sas.upenn.edu/computing/mms/eq_loan) for an additional source for equipment your students can borrow.

Careful thinking about the following questions and steps to take can help make the video project useful for your students and exciting for you.

What do I want students to get out of this project?

Video projects can do a lot of different things – from getting students to think visually to getting students to present research – but you need to have a good idea why you want to do a video project instead of just having students write an essay.

- There are a range of reasons why you might want to assign a video project but you will need to understand the trade offs involved. If you want students to make an entertaining video, they might not also create a well-reasoned argument. If you want them to use video to criticize popular culture, they might not feel they need to do research.

What would an A project look like? What about B or C projects? What constitutes failure?

Once you have a clear answer to why you want students to do a video project, you'll be able to set standards.

- Given the trade-offs above, you will have to prioritize what will count the most in the project. If you decide aesthetics are most important to you, then you may have to spend more time training students on the technical aspects of the project. If you want students to do a lot of research, they may not be able to create the most polished videos.
- Letting your students know how much you care about “techie” aspects like audio, background music, titles and transitions will help students plan their editing time appropriately and avoid spending too much time on more complex aspects of video-editing software.
- Describe your expectations for the video project in writing (preferably on the syllabus) so that students have a sense of what they need to do. Try to be as specific

as possible. It is helpful to give the WIC staff the course syllabus and assignment details before the project begins.

What technical skills do students need?

Once you know the standards you want to apply you will have a sense of the technical skills that students will need -- from filming, to downloading, to editing-- and how much proficiency in these skills students will need. (After all, it is one thing to film a family holiday dinner and another to create an Oscar-worthy 10 minute short documentary.)

- Do you want to use class time to teach students the skills they need? If you don't, try to figure out when students will be able to get those skills and consider what their lack of training might mean for grading. If you do, you should consult with WIC. Their staff can help you design a class session tailored to your needs (contact the staff early). You should also decide if this event is mandatory for your students or not.
- You might also consider using class to have students analyze other video and develop a clear sense of what works and what does not.
- Provide students with a list of resources so they can find help if they run into problems. You should also warn students that at the end of the semester, these resources will likely be swamped.

What smaller segments can you break the project into?

After you know what you are looking for in the video project and have thought through your own technical expectations, think about what different steps students will need to complete their projects. Do students need to do research? Learn how to use the technology? Find film clips? Create a story? Film their own footage? Outline their project? Think about the project step by step so that you can help students see the steps they need to take to do a good job. (Remember that students often wait until the last minute to try to do everything. The more they can do before the deadline, the better their projects will be.)

- Assign these smaller segments of the project throughout the semester. This will help you see how your students are doing but also make sure they don't fall behind.
- Give students firm deadlines and penalties if they miss those deadlines.
- Have students complete a draft of the final project (that they present to you or to the class) a few weeks before the final project is due.



These four questions can get you started planning your video project. If you have further questions about the teaching issues outlined here, please contact the Center for Teaching and Learning at ctl-help@sas.upenn.edu.