

# Instructional Scaffolding

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A description of instructional scaffolding – the process of breaking an assignment into smaller steps to teach students the skills needed to complete each phase of the assignment – and options for scaffolding assignments and learning experiences.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Learn how to scaffold an assignment or learning experience by selecting one or more techniques from the list below. For assistance in scaffolding your course assignments, please [contact CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/).

### What is scaffolding?

In education, scaffolding refers to breaking assignments or learning experiences down into smaller steps. This helps students identify the skills required to complete each part of the assignment and allows them to practice and receive feedback on those skills before moving on from one step to the next. By the time students complete the entire assignment, they have a deeper understanding of the skills, sequence, and process required, and often perform at a higher level.

Think of it like the scaffolding you see around a building under construction. Scaffolding provides support to the structure while each building component is constructed until all of the components are able to fit together as a whole self-supporting building. So, rather than simply assigning students a paper, you might show them how to complete each part of the paper and ask them to submit a draft of each part separately for feedback (from peers and/or the instructor) prior to turning in the final draft. Scaffolding is one aspect of [Universal Design for Learning (UDL)](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/universal-design-for-learning-udl/) and reduces barriers to learning by presenting material in smaller increments.

### Why use scaffolding?

Scaffolded assignments can increase student confidence and motivation by providing opportunities for students to receive feedback to improve their work prior to submitting the final draft. Benefits to scaffolding assignments include:

* Improving student confidence by teaching them that every complex task is merely a series of smaller, more manageable tasks that can be completed step-by-step.
* Providing students with a model for managing complex tasks or assignments.
* Helping students establish the practice of seeking early feedback on their work.
* Promoting students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills by teaching them to examine a complex task, identify the steps and sequence needed to complete it, and anticipate potential problems and solutions at each stage of the task.
* Promoting independent learning. As students develop competence in a new skill, scaffolding is gradually removed. This helps students develop the confidence and skills they need to complete assignments independently in the future.

### How to scaffold

#### Instructional scaffolding strategies:

* Listing steps: Listing the steps in a complex assignment allows students to track their progress and understand how each step fits into the whole assignment.
* Modeling: Demonstrating a skill or process before you ask students to do it helps them know what to expect and anticipate potential challenges.
* Giving time for practice: Skills improve with practice, and practice requires a commitment of time and effort. Providing practice time in class and outside of class signals to students that their skill development matters to you, and that this task deserves their focused attention.
* Increasing difficulty over time: Developing a sequence of progressively more challenging assignments allows students to practice skills, receive feedback, and build confidence before they move on to more challenging requirements.
* Coaching: Instructors can empower students by providing formative feedback (i.e., low-stakes or no grades) on smaller assignments within each step, and reserve summative feedback (e.g., higher-stakes evaluation) for the finished product. This can decrease grading time on end-of-term projects since instructors will have already seen multiple parts of an assignment.
* Peer feedback: Students can learn from each other through peer review and feedback using a rubric provided by the instructor.
* Examples of good work: Examples of completed assignments help students understand what is expected of them and how to approach the task (e.g., examples of well-written essays or well-designed science projects).
* Templates: Templates provide a structure for students to follow to help them organize their thoughts and ideas (e.g., a template for a policy proposal or a critique).
* Rubrics: Rubrics help students to understand how their work will be graded and identify areas where they need to improve. (e.g., a rubric with the criteria that will be used to evaluate a performance or project).

#### Additional Considerations:

* Encourage students to access resources and support. This may include meeting with [librarians](https://libraries.usc.edu/ask-a-librarian), finding tutoring at the [Kortschack Center,](https://kortschakcenter.usc.edu/) obtaining accommodation support through [OSAS](https://osas.usc.edu/), or finding support through [Trojans care 4 Trojans](https://campussupport.usc.edu/trojans-care-4-trojans/).

### Example #1: Scaffolded final paper assignment

Learning Objective: At the end of this course, students will be able to analyze a current public policy topic.

Assignment description: Students will write a 20-page public policy research paper on a topic of their choice, which includes the following sections: introduction, literature review, analysis and policy implementation, and conclusion.

Steps: Each week, students will be asked to build on the previous week’s work, moving closer to the final paper assignment:

1. Instructor models the assignment (optional).
2. Brainstorm a topic.
3. Topic selection (optional: instructor provides feedback).
4. Refine the topic.
5. Annotated bibliography (optional: instructor provides feedback).
6. Substantive outline.
7. Draft literature review (optional: instructor provides feedback).
8. Draft analysis and policy implementation section (optional: instructor provides feedback).
9. Draft introduction and conclusion (optional: instructor provides feedback).
10. Full draft ready for peer review (peers provide feedback).
11. Final version due to the instructor.

### Example #2: Lab Report

Learning Objective: By the end of this course, students will develop their understanding of the scientific method, experimental design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of a lab experiment.

Assignment Description: In this assignment, students will follow a step-by-step process to design, conduct, analyze, and report on an experiment of their choice. This assignment will help students develop critical scientific skills and enhance their understanding of the scientific method.

Steps: Each week, students will be guided during lab time to complete the following steps resulting in a final lab report:

1. Experimental Design – students design an experiment, including hypothesis and methodology.
2. Data Collection – Students conduct the experiment and collect data.
3. Data Analysis – Students analyze the data and create graphs or charts.
4. Results and Discussion – Students write the results and discussion sections of the lab report.
5. Peer Review – Students exchange reports for peer review and feedback.
6. Final Lab Report – Students submit the complete lab report.

### Example #3: Visual Artwork Critical Analysis

Learning Objective: By the end of this assignment, students will:

* Demonstrate an understanding of the historical, cultural, and social contexts of a selected artwork,
* Apply critical and creative thinking skills to analyze a selected artwork, and
* Develop and communicate a personal response to a selected artwork.

Assignment Description: Students will conduct a comprehensive analysis for a selected piece of artwork. The purpose of this assignment is to develop their analytical, interpretive, and expressive skills in the field of arts. Students will apply the knowledge and concepts learned in the course to examine a selected artwork, identify its key features, explore its meanings and implications, and express their own opinions and perspectives.

Steps:

1. Background – Students provide the background information of a selected artwork such as the title, date, medium, genre, style, movement, biography, etc.
2. Problem Identification – Students identify the main question or problem that they want to address in their case study analysis, such as the purpose, message, theme, significance, influence, controversy, etc. of the selected artwork.
3. Proposed Solutions – Students propose possible solutions or answers to the question or problem that they identified, based on their research and analysis of the selected artwork or artist. Students should support their solutions with relevant evidence and examples from the artwork or artist, as well as from other sources.
4. Recommendations – Students make recommendations based on their proposed solutions or answers. Students should explain how their recommendations would enhance their understanding and appreciation of the selected artwork, as well as how they would apply their learning to other artworks or artists.

### References

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