CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE ASSIGNMENTS

Effective online assignments and activities typically...

... take advantage of the Web as a learning environment
The Web offers a wealth of information, services, and tools that can be incorporated into assignments and course activities; you can use its networked, hypertextual nature to stimulate curiosity, encourage exploration, and promote critical thinking. There is no need to be constrained by the limitations of specific learning platforms when developing online assignments.

... start engaging students early in the course
The first assignment is a good indicator of whether a student will complete the course. Interesting, provocative assignments early in the course draw students in, habituate them to the kinds of coursework you have planned, and engage them actively in the larger course community.

... are transparent in their motives and articulate a clear rationale
All assignments benefit from a clearly articulated rationale, but this is especially true online, where it can be more difficult for students to ask clarifying questions. Explaining why you have chosen a particular assignment and why you believe it is valuable is often the best way to persuade students to try out an assignment they might otherwise approach skeptically.

... connect multiple parts of the course
Assignments and activities can weave together different parts of the course, helping students integrate what they learn and develop a deeper understanding of the material.

... have clear criteria for evaluation and assessment
Because grading and assessment practices vary widely in online courses, students often benefit from knowing how their work will be evaluated. Providing clear grading rubrics and other formal evaluation criteria in advance can help students focus on the most important aspects of the assignment.

... give detailed instructions and prompts
Good instructions help students understand what to do when working on an assignment. Instructions shouldn’t assume all students understand the assignment’s purpose or know the steps to follow. Detailed instructions are crucial—but they must also be concise enough that students will actually read them. Consider using video prompts or instructions when you need to convey a lot information related to an assignment.
... **demonstrate variety and flexibility**

Flexibility and variety let students exercise more control over the choices they make in a class. This can make assignments more engaging. Providing multiple options for completing assignments is one way to introduce flexibility; designing assignments that allow for multiple types of answers or **learning approaches** is another.

... **provide good (and bad) examples**

Examples act as models that help students learn to develop their own ideas or responses and to **think more creatively**. Examples also help students who may not be familiar with expectations or practices for certain types of assignments. Pointing out an example’s best and worst features can be especially useful.

... **are inclusive and accessible**

Assignments that are designed from the beginning to be accessible are ideal for online environments. Some online students will not be native English speakers; others will have disabilities that could prevent them from. Still others won’t have access to certain types of resources, tools, or software. Following principles of universal design ensures assignments find the broadest possible audience.