A FREE TEACHING RESOURCE | FOR THE INSTRUCTOR

The Assignment Learning Cycle

Three short class conversations, plus one checkpoint students run themselves

A major assignment has two outcomes: the work students submit, and the learning the task is meant to develop. This routine helps students plan for both.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Students can complete an assignment without ever making the learning behind it explicit. It is easy to focus on the deadline, the product, and the grade while making decisions about strategy, support, and AI without a clear sense of what capability the task is meant to develop. This routine creates three instructor-led moments to step out of production mode: at the start, while there is still time to change course, and after feedback. The fourth moment, Verify, is a checkpoint students run themselves before submission. Making the learning purpose explicit gives students a basis for deciding what thinking they need to do themselves, what support to seek, and where permitted AI may fit without replacing the learning.

THE CYCLE AT A GLANCE

1 At launch
UNDERSTAND · PLAN · PRACTICE FIRST

12 minutes of class
What is the task?
What am I meant to learn?
What is my first move?

2 While working
MONITOR · ADJUST

5 minutes of class
What evidence shows progress?
What will I change?

Before submitting
VERIFY

Student-owned
Does it meet the task and criteria?
Can I stand behind it?

3 After feedback
TRANSFER

8 to 10 minutes of class
What worked?
What will I change?
What carries forward?

Three instructor-led conversations, with Verify left to students. All seven Learning Ownership moves, on one assignment.

Quick route: pages 3 to 8 are the facilitation scripts, one page or two per conversation. Pages 9 to 11 are reference and Learning Ownership background, for when you want them. You do not need to read the whole guide before you run this.

PREPARATION

Choose one capability this assignment is designed to develop. That is the main instructional preparation, and page 9 can help you choose one that is specific enough to protect.

Give students the Assignment Learning Plan and Review. Keep this guide for yourself.

The student plan opens with a How to use this plan box, and each sheet carries a tag naming when that sheet is used: before or early in the assignment, while you are working, before submitting, after feedback.

The student plan shows when each page is used. At launch you will still tell students that you are jumping ahead to Sections 5 and 7 before they return to Sections 4 to 6.

The student plan does not name the seven moves on its first page. The section headings introduce Practice First, Monitor and Adjust, Verify, and Transfer as students reach them. The full mapping is on page 10.

Have the instructions, criteria or rubric, any examples, and your AI expectations available. Section 1 asks students for all of them.

Total class time is about 25 minutes, spread across the life of the assignment rather than one sitting.

Students need no prior knowledge of Learning Ownership. New to it yourself? Read pages 9 to 11 once.

The Assignment Learning Cycle

WHAT YOU GET OUT OF IT

Students plan from the learning as well as the deadline, and you get two early chances to correct misunderstandings about the task or the criteria while there is still time to act on them. The midpoint in particular may surface class-level obstacles: an unclear criterion, an underestimated workload, or a concept most of the class has not resolved.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not require students to complete every box in class. The plan is a learning tool, not a compliance form.

Do not turn the midpoint into a progress report. Students need honest information they can use, which means it cannot feel like an audit.

Do not make the final conversation only about the grade. Return to the learning goal they set at the start.

Do not ask for six improvements. One lesson carried into the next assignment is more useful.

Do not assume every problem belongs to the student. Repeated confusion about a criterion or an expected standard may also be information for you.

WHAT STUDENTS FINISH, AND WHEN

At launch, in class, 12 min	Sections 1, 2 and 3, the first row of Section 5, and Section 7
After launch, 5 to 10 min	Section 4, the rest of Section 5, and Section 6
Midpoint, in class, 5 min	Section 8
Before submitting, on their own	Section 9
After feedback, in class, 8 to 10 min	Section 10

Launch the assignment

12 minutes, when you introduce the assignment

The aim is not to complete the plan in class. It is to get students started well enough to finish it.

MINUTES 1–2 Activate: what is this assignment for?

Ask students to think silently for about 10 seconds. Do not take responses yet.

"*When you first receive a major assignment, what do you look for first?*"

Then say: "Most of us look at the deadline and what has to be handed in. For the next few minutes we are also going to make the learning behind it visible."

"*This assignment is designed to help you become better able to _____ .*"

If several capabilities apply, say so, then choose one: "There are several things you will practice here. For today I want to make one of them especially visible."

MINUTES 2–5 Understand the assignment

In the plan: Section 1, Understand the Assignment

"*Use the instructions, the criteria, any examples, and what I just said. Write brief notes on what you are being asked to produce, and what capability the task is meant to develop.*"

Section 1 also asks for the AI expectations for this assignment. If the class completed the course-start Page A of The First AI Conversation, remind them that this assignment needs a fresh decision, not the course default. If AI use is significant here and deserves a fuller conversation, run Page B of that resource separately or allow extra time; it does not fold into these twelve minutes. Otherwise, briefly clarify the AI expectations for this assignment. This is where you can clear up a misunderstanding before it shapes three weeks of work.

MINUTES 5–7 Check the starting point

In the plan: Section 2, Check My Starting Point

"*Before you plan, take stock. What do you already have that will help? Think about prior feedback, similar work, knowledge, or skills you can use. What is one gap or unclear part that could cause trouble later?*"

This keeps the plan grounded in the actual starting points students have rather than treating everyone as if they begin in the same place.

MINUTES 7–9 Choose one learning goal

In the plan: Section 3, Choose One Learning Goal

The plan asks for one thing, chosen from what the assignment is meant to develop and where the student is starting.

"*A grade can be a goal, but it does not tell you what to do. Choose one thing you want to become better able to do by the time you finish. Then name one sign of progress: something you will be able to explain, solve, or justify that you cannot reliably do yet.*"

Do not skip the second prompt. Sections 8 and 10 return to it later, and a concrete sign of progress makes the learning goal much easier to monitor.

Launch the assignment

MINUTES 9–12 Make the first move concrete

In the plan: Section 5 first row, and Section 7, Practice First

"*Before you leave, write the first thing you will actually do, and when.*"

Section 5 puts it bluntly: "Work on my assignment" is not a plan. Then ask the Practice First question, which is one line in Section 7: what thinking or practice will you attempt yourself first?

"*We are going to use parts of the plan out of order today. That is intentional. After class, return to Sections 4 to 6 and finish planning the work and the learning.*"

Saying this helps prevent confusion at launch: students may see Section 4 skipped and assume they have missed something.

"*Section 5 plans what you will do. Section 6 plans what you still need to learn or practice while doing it.*"

"*Practice First does not mean doing the whole assignment alone. It means protecting your first attempt at the thinking this assignment is meant to develop.*"

Do not leave Practice First for homework. It takes a minute. It gives students a basis for deciding how to use support and AI during the rest of the assignment. This intentionally brings Practice First forward. Students can refine that initial decision after they complete Sections 4 to 6.

If time permits, invite one or two general questions about the task or the criteria before students leave. This can also surface misunderstandings about the task or criteria.

The mid-assignment check

5 minutes, while there is still time to change course

Plus a checkpoint students run themselves before they submit.

WHEN TO RUN IT

Roughly halfway between launch and submission. The exact day matters less than whether students still have room to act on what they notice.

5 MINUTES Monitor and adjust

In the plan: Section 8, Mid-Assignment Check

"*Open the Mid-Assignment Check. The question is not whether you have been busy. It is what evidence shows your approach is working.*"

Students answer five things: what evidence shows progress toward the learning goal they chose in Section 3, what is working, what is weak or confusing or being avoided, whether the work is moving toward the criteria, and one change they will make now. Brief notes are enough. Five minutes only works if students know they are not expected to write paragraphs.

"*Optional, 30 seconds: tell a partner only the one change you are making, not the details of your work.*"

That creates a small commitment without asking anyone to share details or difficulties.

If a common issue seems to be emerging, invite a general question or use a quick anonymous poll. Do not ask students to report individual progress.

IF MANY STUDENTS HAVE NOT STARTED

That is itself the finding, and it is worth naming without judgement. Have them use the same section to plan the next 48 hours rather than the whole assignment. A midpoint check that produces "I have not begun, and here is my first step" is far more useful than one that produces nothing.

WHAT YOU GET OUT OF IT

You create a chance to notice problems before submission, while students still have time to act on them.

You may also surface class-level obstacles: an unclear criterion, an underestimated workload, or a concept most of the class has not resolved.

The mid-assignment check

BEFORE SUBMITTING: A CHECKPOINT STUDENTS RUN THEMSELVES

In the plan: Section 9, Verify Before Submitting

No class time required. Ideally about 24 to 48 hours before the deadline, or once students have a complete-enough draft to evaluate, remind them:

"*Before you submit, use the Verify section. The question is not only whether it is finished. It is whether you can explain and stand behind it, and whether it does what the task and the criteria require.*"

Section 9 asks students what still needs to be checked, revised, cited, or verified, and then has them run a responsibility check: they answered the task and addressed the criteria, checked important reasoning, claims, sources, and any AI-assisted content, can explain and stand behind the work in their own words, the work reflects their own understanding and judgment, and they followed the course AI expectations including disclosure. It ends with one final change to make before submitting.

The checkpoint needs to happen early enough for students to act on what they notice, which is why it is not simply a final checklist. Leaving this one with students is deliberate. Verify is the move they will need when nobody is prompting them.

IF THE ASSIGNMENT IS A GROUP PROJECT

The cycle still applies, but students need both an individual learning goal and shared group agreements. See the group-work guidance on page 10.

Learn from the feedback

8 to 10 minutes, when students receive the result and feedback

MINUTES 1–2 Look before reflecting

In the plan: Section 10, Learn From the Result and Transfer It Forward

"*Take a minute to read the feedback before trying to explain it.*"

"*Now return to the learning goal you chose in Section 3. What do the result and the feedback tell you about the progress you made toward it?*"

Returning to their own goal is what makes this cyclical rather than a generic reflection.

MINUTES 2–5 Separate the result from the approach

"*Which parts of your plan, strategies, or support seemed to help, and what should you keep next time? What will you change, start, or use earlier?*"

This separates the quality of the product from the quality of the process. A student can produce good work through an approach that may not be sustainable on a larger or more demanding task, and a student can use a thoughtful process and still be surprised by the result.

MINUTES 5–8 Carry one lesson forward

"*Do not leave with a list of everything you should do differently. Choose one lesson important enough to use from the beginning of the next similar assignment.*"

"*Write it in the final transfer prompt at the end of Section 10: one concrete lesson you will carry into your next Assignment Learning Plan and use from the beginning.*"

Have them copy it where they will find it again: at the top of their next Assignment Learning Plan, or in a photo on their phone. If this was the last assignment of the course, ask them to carry it into another course instead. If time allows, add the connection question from Go deeper: where else could they use this lesson, skill, or strategy?

OPTIONAL, 1 MIN Reflect on the reflection

"*Before you close the plan: what did answering these questions show you that the grade alone did not? Which question was hardest to answer, and what might that tell you?*"

This is reflection on reflecting. It asks students to notice what the review gave them, which can make them more willing to use it again without being asked.

OPTIONAL, 2 MIN Feedback to the course

Section 10 includes a question students answer only if you assign it: what could the instructor, TA, course, or available supports do to help them approach a future assignment more effectively? An anonymous exit slip works well:

"*What is one support, clarification, example, or resource that would help you approach the next assignment more effectively?*"

That makes the cycle reciprocal rather than placing all of the adjustment on students.

Learn from the feedback

IF A STUDENT SAYS

"I just need to try harder."
Harder at what, specifically? More effort with the same approach may not address the problem. What is one thing you would do differently?

"I just need to start earlier."
Maybe. What specifically would you do earlier? Turn "start earlier" into an action you could actually begin.

"I do not know what went wrong."
Start with the feedback and the goal you set. What does it show was strong, weak, or different from what you intended?

"I followed my plan and still did badly."
Then the question is not whether you had a plan. Did the approach fit what the task required, and where does the feedback suggest the mismatch was?

"AI made the assignment much faster."
What part did AI make faster? Which capability was this meant to develop, and did the faster process still give you enough practice with it?

THE ASSIGNMENT LEARNING CYCLE

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UNDERSTAND · PLAN · PRACTICE FIRST
What is the task?
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What is my first move?

2 While working
MONITOR · ADJUST
What evidence shows progress?
What will I change?

Before submitting
VERIFY
Does it meet the task and criteria?
Can I stand behind it?

3 After feedback
TRANSFER
What worked?
What will I change?
What carries forward?

Then back to the beginning. The Assignment Learning Plan and Review appears in Part 3 of Think First. The printable students download includes extra orientation and some clarified prompts for students using it without the book, so the two may not be word for word identical.

Support and Examples

Read once. Keep it beside you the first time you run the cycle.

CHOOSING THE CAPABILITY

A specific capability gives the learning goal, the Practice First decision, the midpoint check, and the transfer sentence a clear target. Two prompts that work: look at the criterion you weight most heavily, or finish this sentence.

"*If a student submitted flawless work but still could not _____, I would feel this assignment had failed.*"

TOO BROAD	SPECIFIC ENOUGH TO PROTECT
Critical thinking	Weigh competing explanations and justify which is better supported
Research skills	Judge whether a source is appropriate evidence for this claim
Writing	Develop a defensible claim and support it with relevant evidence

WHAT PRACTICE FIRST MEANS

Making an initial attempt at the thinking or skill the assignment is meant to develop, before turning to support that could do that thinking for the student. The attempt does not need to be polished or complete. Its value is in showing what the student already understands and where they are stuck.

If the task itself is unclear, clarification comes first. Practice First protects the attempt at the learning, not the struggle to decode instructions.

THE WORK PLAN AND THE LEARNING PLAN

Section 5 asks how the work will get done. Section 6 asks how the learning will happen.

It is easy to plan only the first. A student can therefore complete the work on time without giving equal attention to the learning the assignment is meant to develop.

Producing the deliverable is not necessarily the same as developing the capability. Naming both plans is a clear way to make that distinction visible to a class.

WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS

At the midpoint, students may report activity rather than evidence. The difference is worth naming aloud once.

"*I have done a lot of reading.*"	→ I can explain the two main positions without looking.
"*I have written 800 words.*"	→ My draft answers the question the task actually asks.
"*I have a plan.*"	→ I finished the first step and know what the second one is.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE TIME FOR ONE TOUCH

Run Touch 1. Touches 2 and 3 both refer back to the goal and plan set at launch, so without it they have nothing to return to. For a second touch, choose by what your students need: the midpoint check if they need help adjusting while the work is underway, or the feedback conversation if carrying a lesson into the next assignment is the priority.

Support and Examples

IF THE ASSIGNMENT IS A GROUP PROJECT

Keep the individual learning parts of the cycle. Each student should still identify what they are meant to learn, set a personal learning goal, and make a Practice First decision.

Add group-level planning for the work: roles, working deadlines, how drafts will be combined and reviewed, AI expectations, check-ins, and what the group will do if someone falls behind.

At the midpoint, ask the group to monitor both the work and the collaboration. Are agreed tasks moving? Does everyone understand enough to stand behind the final submission? What needs to change now?

Before submission, Verify belongs to both levels. Each student remains responsible for their own contribution, and the group reviews the final submission together.

Related Think First tool: Group Project Ownership Plan, in Part 3.

DO I COLLECT IT? DO I GRADE IT?

Generally, no. The plan is a learning tool, not a compliance form, and keeping it private can make it easier to use as an honest working document. If you want a participation check, ask for the one transfer sentence from Section 10 rather than the completed plan. Grading the quality of a reflection can shift attention toward producing the response students think the instructor wants.

FOR THE INSTRUCTOR | THE SYSTEM BEHIND THIS ROUTINE

The Learning Ownership System

New to Learning Ownership? Read this section once.

WHAT THE LEARNING OWNERSHIP SYSTEM IS

Seven moves students can use across many academic tasks. Each is a question rather than a rule, so students enter wherever the situation requires and return as often as it takes. The system is a practical translation of research on self-regulated learning, metacognition, retrieval practice, feedback, and motivation. This routine is the only one of the free teaching resources that uses all seven.

WHERE EACH MOVE APPEARS IN THE CYCLE

Understand	What must I produce? What am I meant to learn or demonstrate? What does strong work require? What are the AI expectations? Section 1
Plan	Where am I starting? What is my goal? What approach, work plan, learning plan, resources, and support fit? Sections 2 to 6
Practice First	What thinking or skill will I attempt myself before turning to support that could do that thinking for me? Section 7
Monitor	What evidence shows my approach is working? Section 8, at the midpoint
Adjust	What one change will I make while there is still time? Section 8
Verify	Can I explain and stand behind this? Section 9, student-owned
Transfer	What carries into the next assignment? Section 10, after feedback

The Learning Ownership System

WHY THIS ROUTINE IS A GOOD PLACE TO START

A major assignment is a teaching moment every instructor already runs. The cycle adds about 25 minutes across several weeks and asks for no new content. Because it exercises all seven moves on work students already have to do, it shows the whole system in one familiar experience rather than introducing a framework and hoping it is applied later.

THE COMPLETE SYSTEM IN ONE BOOK

Think First teaches all seven moves directly to students, across assignments, exams, AI use, feedback, weekly planning, and recovery. Students enter through a 30-situation index at the point of need rather than reading it in order. This routine applies the system to one assignment. The book gives students a route when the next situation is different.

ONE CAPABILITY THROUGH THE WHOLE CYCLE

A worked example. The capability chosen at launch is what every later decision points back to.

The capability	Analyze evidence rather than summarize it
Goal, Section 3	"Make a claim my evidence actually supports, not a summary of what I read."
Sign of progress, 3	"I can state my claim in one sentence and explain how at least two pieces of evidence support it."
Practice First, 7	"Before looking at any commentary, I will write my own claim from two sources."
Evidence, Section 8	"I can state my claim clearly, but two paragraphs are still summarizing sources instead of explaining how they support it."
Adjust, Section 8	"Next session I will write the claim first, then revise each paragraph to explain how the evidence supports it."
Transfer, Section 10	"Before my next similar assignment, I will draft the claim before I read widely."

KEEP GOING WITH LEARNING OWNERSHIP

The whole system	The Seven Moves, a one-page reference
Before the first assignment	The First AI Conversation, at course start or with a task
The complete book	Explore Think First
Everything free	LearningOwnership.com/educators

All free resources