

Cinderella Deadlines: Reconsidering Timelines for Student Work

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In preparation for the coming semester, a faculty member recently asked me how to change deadlines on the LMS to midnight on a given day. After helping the professor, I started thinking about why we might need to reconsider this option, both for our own good and for our students. How did so many of us come to accept the universality of a midnight deadline that casts professors in the fabled role of fairy godmothers, and what exactly turns into a pumpkin when the clock strikes twelve in this scenario?



Before electronic submissions for papers were an option, students often had to turn in written assignments for professors during class—a practice some professors still employ. The general idea around these deadlines, whether at the beginning or end of class, largely centers on a shared schedule and the convenience of being in the same place at the same time. More generous or flexible professors might allow students to turn in work during office hours or perhaps by the end of the day. In these cases, the deadline is set, again, by what's convenient for the professor, or according to business hours specified by the university rather than by a pedagogical imperative.

However, with more and more professors using electronic communication and accepting work through services like Turnitin, email, drop boxes, and forums in their learning management systems, the ease of shared proximity has become less relevant, and the range of possible deadlines has grown. The advent of digital submissions should offer us a chance to think about deadlines in new ways and to reflect on our deadline policies. As Maryellen Weimer points out, “It’s useful to look at the policies as a whole and ask what kind of climate they collectively create. What’s their relationship to learning? How do they promote it, individually and collectively?” There are more questions we could ask ourselves about deadlines:

- Does this deadline align with my professional standards?

- What messages, stated or unstated, am I conveying to my students about work ethic and effective time management?
- And perhaps most importantly, does the policy relate to my teaching philosophy or does it simply “promote the power and position of the professor?” (Weimer)

Instead of thinking critically about their policies, some professors have defaulted to the midnight deadlines pre-programmed into their LMS settings. It’s possible they do so because it’s easier than changing them. Others may think they are being generous fairy godmothers by foregoing the traditional in-class deadline and allowing students to make the most of the entire day on which a paper is due. In doing so, the professor doesn’t have to compromise on the technical due date, but students have more time to work on the assignment.

I would like to suggest, though, that regardless of the reason they came into fashion, it’s time to rethink these Cinderella deadlines, which are not based on convenience for either professors or students, and do not promote a professional awareness of business hours or reasonable working conditions. On the contrary, they seem instead to signal to students that burning the midnight oil is an acceptable model of time management and an ethical boundary to allow in future work settings, even though most professors would not welcome similar parameters on their own working hours.

Without the easy rationale of convenience for students or professors, or the societal constructs of business hours, what are we left with? Hopefully, purposeful policies with sound ideological or pedagogical foundations that we can articulate to the people most affected by them, our students. As Maryellen Weimer states, “Students need our course policies. They also need to understand the rationales on which they rest.”

This shift in deadline times and modalities can offer educators a chance to critically examine part of our classroom practice that we’ve long taken for granted, and in doing so, I suggest that as we implement a clear deadline policy, we should also consider the ways in which we can communicate deadlines to students, using meaningful rationales for why we’ve mandated them. We can have students post or turn in their assignments at times that make sense for the nature of the assignment and our own schedules while at the same time showing respect for their time. Some examples include the following:

- This assignment should be turned in no later than 2:00 p.m. on Thursday because I’m leaving for a conference and want to take the papers with me.
- This assignment is due by 5:00 p.m. on Thursday because I need to check your understanding of the topic before we move on to the next unit that begins on Tuesday.
- This assignment is due [at the official time break begins according to the campus calendar] so that I have time to read your papers over break.
- This assignment is due at 1:00 on Wednesday because I’ve scheduled time to look at your work after my department meeting and respond to you by the end of the day.

- This assignment is due at 5:00 p.m. on Friday [the end of the work day/week] because I am preparing you for the business world.

Professors value their own time, often setting parameters about working after the business day or on weekends. Students deserve that same respect, and providing students with the rationale behind our deadlines shows them that we respect both their learning process and their time. Setting reasonable deadlines is still about the professor's convenience while respecting students' working hours, too, and it makes sense no matter what kind of progressive pedagogy you employ:

- If you practice transparent teaching, students have a clear understanding of why you have set a particular deadline. You're sharing the reason with them so they understand why it's important to you and to them.
- If you place emphasis on preparing students for the workplace, you can employ a philosophy that all assignments should be completed within the business day of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., as most employers do not schedule reports or presentations to be delivered in the middle of the night.
- If you prioritize a social pedagogy and the development of a strong work-life balance, you can demonstrate compassion for students' well-being by setting deadlines that encourage adequate opportunities for students to practice healthy rest/sleep patterns by not scheduling midnight deadlines.

There are a myriad of other philosophies and pedagogies that might justify a great many deadlines, from the start of the workday to a scheduled class time or even to the end of business hours. All instructors should review their course goals and core values to determine which deadlines best suit their own needs and the needs of their students. We all have the opportunity to do some critical thinking in this moment and arrive at any number of meaningful conclusions, but I do hope that at the very least we can agree that defaulting deadlines to the stroke of midnight isn't one of them.

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Reference

Weimer, Maryellen. "Examining Our Course Policies." Faculty Focus. Magna Publications, 24 January 2018. Web.