



Deciphering Essay Prompts

When an instructor assigns an essay, it is important that you understand both the relevant content that you have been learning in the course AND what the prompt is actually asking you to do with that content. An essay prompt may have several layers of information that you will need to consider before and during your writing process to make sure you fully complete the assignment.

WHEN YOU RECEIVE THE PROMPT:

- Read the prompt completely with a pencil in hand. Indicate for yourself the important phrases that help you understand the assignment, as well as those phrases that you find confusing (for example, underline the important phrases and circle the things you don't understand). If your instructor explains the prompt to the class, be sure to take notes about any additional information or parts of the prompt that the instructor emphasizes.
- ASK QUESTIONS! Make sure to ask any questions right away, either in class or directly after. Instructors appreciate it when students ask for clarification or further information as soon as possible rather than waiting until the last minute. And remember, if you have a question, others in your class are probably wondering the same things. You also don't want to waste time doing part of an assignment incorrectly just because you waited to ask your question!

BREAKING DOWN YOUR ASSIGNMENT:

Essay prompts are generally made up of a few different components, each serving a different purpose in communicating what you need to do to complete the assignment. Breaking down the prompt can help you both when you are trying to get started with the assignment and when you are checking to make sure that you have completed all the requirements.

- **Background information:** Many prompts begin with background information that will contextualize the task you are being asked to do. This may include sentences that reference major themes you have covered in your course, summarize a historical time period or political climate during which your readings have taken place, or other information to introduce the topic.
- **The task(s):** Once the assignment has been contextualized, the instructor will present the actual task at hand. The task portion will tell you what kind of essay you will be writing; whether you will take a perspective on the course material, synthesize or apply the ideas of the course in a new way, or come up with something completely new. Use the list of "**Important Words in Essay Prompts**" below to help you understand which tasks your instructor expects you to accomplish in the essay.
- **Technical guidelines:** Your prompt will provide you with the guidelines for the assignment, including essential information like expected length and due dates. Additionally, the prompt may tell you the requirements for font size/type, document margins and line spacing, titles and headers, and citation style. Pay close attention to all of these details! Following these simple directions will make you stand out in a good way and show that you took the time to thoroughly read and understand the prompt.

- **Additional questions to consider:** In addition to the context and the actual task at hand, there may be additional information for you to consider on the page and off the page..
 - The instructor may provide guiding questions or instructions for attacking the problem. This kind of additional information is usually meant to help you get started, clarify the prompt, and/or spark ideas. Generally, this kind of additional information is not “required,” meaning you probably don’t need to answer each and every guiding question, but they are good questions to keep in mind so you stay on track. If you are unclear about which questions are guiding questions versus which questions you are required to answer in your essay, be sure to ask your instructor as soon as possible.
 - What is the purpose of the assignment? Beyond the task of the assignment, what is your instructor hoping you will accomplish? Understanding why you are completing an assignment can help you focus your time on what is most important. This can also help you answer many questions for yourself. For example, if you know the purpose of the assignment is to interpret new information using the frameworks learned in class instead of writing about the frameworks themselves, you know to focus on your new analysis instead of review.
 - How will you support the ideas in your essay? Will you be using course material or do you need to conduct research for outside sources? Will you use your own experiences as evidence? Be sure to make these determinations early so that you have time to gather the materials you need.
 - What are the rules of writing or the writing style expected in your field? Is it appropriate for you to write it the first person or use colloquial expressions, or should you be more professional or detached? You should also consider your audience. Do you expect your reader to have background in your topic? To be educated in your field? To have read the same novel? Understanding your audience will help you determine how much context is necessary to provide about different topics throughout your essay.

You should also keep in mind that, in most cases of academic writing, you are being asked to make an argument. Even when you are also being asked to analyze, discuss, or define, you are usually being asked to take a position on the topic. So if you have been asked to analyze the use of symbolism in a novel, you should go beyond describing how symbolism was constructed and which symbols were used and also take a position that you can defend (such as the effectiveness of the symbolism, which interpretation of the symbol is best, etc.). Making an argument (again, in most cases) also means you will need to form a thesis that you work to prove throughout the essay.

IMPORTANT Words in Essay Prompts

Analyze: Discuss the whole in terms of its parts—e.g., a structure in terms of its components; a process in terms of stages; an event in terms of causes. Involves characterizing the whole, identifying the parts, and showing how the parts relate to each other to make the whole.

Assess: Determine the importance, magnitude, or value of something. Often requires you to develop clearly stated criteria of judgment, and to analyze your subject carefully. (See EVALUATE)

Compare/Contrast: Discuss the similarities and differences between two items. Involves stating the purpose of the process and identifying the points of comparison.

Criticize: Express your judgment about the merit or truth of the factors or views mentioned. Analyze the subject in a careful, balanced manner. Make sure your standards of judgment are clearly stated.

Define: Give the special characteristics by which a concept, thing, event, can be recognized. In other words, place it in its general class and then differentiate it from other members of its class.

Describe: Give an account of; present in detail the characteristics by which an object, action, animal, or person, can be recognized or an event or process be visualized.

Discuss: Examine, analyze carefully, presenting opposing or different views. (See EXAMINE)

Evaluate: Reach a judgment about the significance, value, or importance of a thing, idea, or statement. Make the criteria of your judgment explicit.

Examine: Discuss a given topic or controversial statement for a better understanding of its meaning in nature.

Explain: Make clear the reason for, or basic principles of, something; make intelligible. May involve relating the unfamiliar to the more familiar.

Identify: Briefly answer, as relevant, the questions who, what, why, where, when, and how.

Illustrate: Use a visual aid or concrete example to explain or clarify essential features of a problem or concept.

Justify: Show reasons in support of an act, attitude, statement, thesis, etc.

List: As in "enumerate," write an itemized series of concise statements or terms.

Outline: Organize a description under main points and subordinate points, omitting minor details and stressing the clarification of elements.

Prove: Establish that something is true by citing factual evidence or giving clear, logical reasons.

Relate: Show how things are related to, or connected with, each other or how one causes another, correlates with another, or is like another.

Review: Give an overview or summary, identifying main issues and commenting on them.

State: Present the main points in brief, clear sequence, usually omitting details, illustrations, or examples.

Summarize: Give the main points or essential facts in condensed form, omitting details and illustrations.

Trace: Present the development or progression of events, ideas, trends, etc. May be done in outline or (when requested) in depth or detail.