

How do I make sure I understand an assignment?

Overview

While some writing assignments are straightforward, others may need careful deciphering to make sure you are following the guidelines. Looking carefully at the instructions provided for any writing assignment to be certain that you understand the guidelines not only prevents missteps but can also help you develop strategies for conquering the task ahead.

General Considerations

Some terms found in assignments relate to genres used in different disciplines. *Close Reading*, *Literature Review*, *Report*, *Study*, *Memorandum*, and *Proposal* are some examples of terms that relate to specific formats. There are important distinctions between these genres. For example, a *Close Reading* of a piece of literature requires more analysis than a *Literature Review*, which asks for key points of summary that relate to an argument. If you are unfamiliar with these terms and they show up in an assignment, be sure to clarify the guidelines with your instructor.

In Practice

Ask Questions

One of the most important things to know about understanding assignments is that if an assignment or any part of an assignment confuses you, you can always ask your instructor for clarification. Asking questions might help your instructor to realize what other students might be struggling with as well. Before stopping by office hours or after class with questions, you might first consider the suggestions below so that you can identify exactly what parts of the assignment remain unclear.

Become Familiar with Common Assignment Goals

Assignments will often contain a variety of terms that can help you to identify the task or tasks you need to perform. The terms generally fall into one of the following categories:

- **Summarize** – A summary provides a condensed explanation of key features from a text or activity. Many assignments might require some summary even if summarizing isn't the main goal of the assignment. A summary may be required if the assignment includes words such as *describe*, *explain*, *depict*, and *illustrate*.
- **Analyze** – If an assignment asks you to analyze something, it is asking for your own logical interpretation of the meaning behind the constituent parts of the subject. An analysis is different than a summary as it provides a new understanding about the subject in question, not just an overview. Other words that may be asking for analysis are *elaborate*, *examine*, *discuss*, *explore*, *investigate*, and *determine*.

- **Argue** – If an assignment asks you to make an argument, you need to take a stand on a topic and develop your claim to show why your position makes sense. There are many terms related to argument. For example, *evaluate*, *critique*, *assess*, and *review* may ask for an argument about the worth of a subject. *Propose*, *recommend*, and *advise* may ask for a solution to a problem. *Define* asks for an argument about what a word or concept means. *Compare/contrast*, *synthesize*, and *apply* (as in *apply one text to another*) may ask for an argument about key points of similarity and difference in your subjects, and an analysis about why those points matter.

Break Down the Tasks and Locate the Central Goal

Just like any other text, an assignment can be broken down and analyzed. By keeping in mind that any good essay will have one main goal and one central argument or thesis that incorporates the various subparts, you can begin to determine what shape your essay should take. (In some cases an instructor might not expect an argument or thesis; however, this is rare. If you suspect a thesis is not needed but don't know for sure, check with your instructor.)

1. **What Should This Essay Really Contain?** Highlight each separate task included in the instructions. Consider the terms above as you identify the tasks you need to perform. If the assignment is relatively simple, write out the tasks that will need to be performed. If there are terms that you aren't familiar with, consider what kind of task they imply.
2. **What Should the Thesis/Argument Be About?** Once you have identified the tasks and goals, determine which is the main goal. Every essay should have a well-stated, debatable, and complex thesis statement that guides the essay, but it might be up to you to figure out what the focus of the argument should be. Think about the most important issues discussed in class as they can be clues to what an instructor wants. What would your instructor want you to take a stand on?
3. **How Should This Essay Be Structured?** Once you have determined the central goal, outline the essay according to how you think it should be completed, showing how each sub-goal will relate to the main goal or goals. Consider how the other tasks or sub-goals connect to the main argument. If you find you can't outline with confidence or still aren't sure how the assignment should be completed, make a note of which elements remain unclear and plan to meet with your instructor.

Analyzing a Sample Assignment

Imagine you have been given this essay prompt: *Compare Denmark's current environmental policies with those of the past. What difficulties have the policies faced over time and how have they been adapted to current environmental concerns? Incorporate the ideas presented in the article by Smith and discuss whether or not the new environmental standards helped or hurt the farmers in Denmark based on the timeline that we discussed in class? What needs to be changed?*

Step 1: What Should This Essay Really Contain?

The essay asks for several tasks of various kinds. 1.) A comparison between past and present environmental policies in Denmark. 2.) A description or summary of the problems these policies have faced and how they have changed. 3.) An analysis of what Smith says about the success and failure of the policies. 4.) An evaluation of what the policies have meant for farmers. 5.) A proposal for changes that would need to be made.

Step Two: What Should The Thesis/Argument Be About?

Though the essay asks for a comparison first, that task seems like more of a summary than an argument. The analysis of what Smith says also sounds like the potential central focus, but the analysis seems to be needed mostly to help strengthen the evaluation to come. Since the class is a policy class that focuses on understanding why policies in many governments succeed or fail, it is probably important to evaluate the policies. So task 4 is probably the central argument, combined with task 5.

Step Three: How Should This Essay Be Structured?

With tasks 4 and 5 as the central focus, the introduction should include an evaluation in the thesis along with a sense of the proposal. After the thesis, it makes sense to first summarize the past and present policies, which will then lead to a summary of what has changed. Smith could be brought in during both summaries to provide commentary on what has occurred. Once these elements have been established, analyzing the successes and failures of the policies should enter. A proposal could come last and would be based on avoiding future policy failures.

Exercise

Complete the tasks described above for the following essay assignment. Remember, there might be more than one right way to complete the task.

Sample Art History Assignment:

Focusing on Courbet's painting, Woman with a Parrot, and Cabanal's painting, Birth of Venus, can you describe the similarities and differences in the way these two artists have depicted the female nude? (Think about the subjects of each of the works when you answer this question.) When it was shown at the Salon, Courbet's painting ignited quite a scandal; Cabanal's, on the other hand, was a favorite with the critics. Which painting had more impact and why? [Assignment taken from <http://mysite.pratt.edu/~wtc/sample1.html>]

1. What Tasks Does This Essay Contain?

2. What Should The Thesis/Argument Be About?

3. How Should This Essay Be Structured?

Possible Solution: 1. Describe, Compare/Contrast, Evaluate (which had more impact) and Argue why. 2. I would argue why the painting I chose had a greater impact. 3. I would begin by describing the scandal in my intro, then include a thesis of evaluation, then describe both paintings in depth (including details of subject matter), then analyze the worth of each, then argue the greater worth of one painting, then analyze why I made that choice.

Resources:

Hjorthoj, Keith. *Transitions to College Writing*. 3rd Ed. Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 2001.

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