

Understanding Writing Assignments

How to Decipher the Paper Assignment

Many instructors write their assignment prompts differently. By following a few steps, you can better understand the requirements for the assignment. The best way, as always, is to ask the instructor about anything confusing.

1. **Read the prompt the entire way through once.** This gives you an overall view of what is going on.
2. **Underline or circle the portions that you absolutely must know.** This information may include due date, research (source) requirements, page length, and format (MLA, APA, CMS).
3. **Underline or circle important phrases.** You should know your instructor at least a little by now - what phrases does she use in class? Does he repeatedly say a specific word? If these are in the prompt, you know the instructor wants you to use them in the assignment.
4. **Think about how you will address the prompt.** The prompt contains clues on how to write the assignment. Your instructor will often describe the ideas she wants discussed either in questions, in bullet points, or in the text of the prompt. Think about each of these sentences and number them so that you can write a paragraph or section of your essay on that portion if necessary.
5. **Rank ideas in descending order, from most important to least important.** Instructors may include more questions or talking points than you can cover in your assignment, so rank them in the order you think is more important. One area of the prompt may be more interesting to you than another.
6. **Ask your instructor questions if you have any.**

After you are finished with these steps, ask yourself the following:

1. **What is the purpose of this assignment?** Is my purpose to provide information without forming an argument, to construct an argument based on research, or analyze a poem and discuss its imagery?
2. **Who is my audience?** Is my instructor my only audience? Who else might read this? Will it be posted online? What are my readers' needs and expectations?
3. **What resources do I need to begin work?** Do I need to conduct literature (hermeneutic or historical) research, or do I need to review important literature on the topic and then conduct empirical research, such as a survey or an observation? How many sources are required?
4. **Who - beyond my instructor - can I contact to help me if I have questions?** Do you have a writing lab or student service center that offers tutorials in writing? Can you condense questions into shorter formats to email the Purdue OWL Email Tutors?