

Interpreting Your Assignments

The first step towards being successful in any writing assignment is understanding the question. Critical reading of assignments leads to improved skills in other types of reading and writing. If you become skilled at figuring out what the real goals of assignments are, you are going to be better at understanding the goals of all of your courses.

Recognize that your instructor has a reason for giving you this assignment and for giving it at a particular point in the semester. In every assignment, there is a challenge: anything from demonstrating an ability to think clearly to demonstrating an ability to use the library. An assignment is not a general suggestion of what to do; it is an opportunity to show that you understand the material and that you can integrate what you know with what the instructor wants to know. Essay assignments give you more than just a topic to discuss—they ask you to do something specific with the topic. Remember that. Be careful to avoid the other extreme as well: do not read more into the assignment than what is there.

First, read the question carefully and understand the active verb in the prompt:

- **analyze**—determine how individual pieces are part of the whole, conclude how

something works, decide what it means, or prove why it is significant

- **apply**—use information that you’ve been given to show how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation
- **argue**—take a side and defend it using evidence to show why the other side is in error
- **assess**—summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **cause**—show how one event made something else happen
- **compare**—show how two or more things are alike
- **contrast**—show how two or more things differ
- **define**—give the subject’s meaning (in line with some kind of authority). You may need to give more than one view.
- **evaluate, respond**—state your opinion of the subject, but be prepared to justify your thoughts
- **explain**—give reasons why something happened
- **illustrate**—give specific examples of the subject and show how they connect to the subject
- **prove, justify**—give reasons or examples to validate how or why something happens
- **relate**—describe the connections between ideas
- **research**—collect information from out-

side authorities; be prepared to analyze and connect what you have found with what you already know

- **summarize**—give a brief synopsis of what you have learned
- **support**—using evidence, provide substantiation to back up your claim
- **synthesize**—put two or more things together in a meaningful way; do not just summarize each and say that they are similar or different—show how putting them together makes sense
- **trace**—show how something has developed and changed over time

Next, understand your audience

Who is your reader? In order to produce the best paper that addresses the issue appropriately, think of your audience as a person who is smart enough to understand a clear, logical argument, but not as a person who is an expert in what you are writing about. Remember, even if the instructor knows everything there is to know about your paper topic, he or she still has to make sure that you understand the topic, and that is where a clearly-written paper does the trick. Understanding audience also helps you to determine two important matters: tone and level of information:

- **Tone** is the “voice” of your paper. Should you be chatty, formal, or objective? You

will usually find the middle ground that you need to. Avoid being too informal or chatty, but avoid going in the other direction... using unnecessarily complicated words to make you sound “academic.” This is a particular pitfall because if you use words that sound good but that you do not know the meaning of, you could be using the word the wrong way and sounding ridiculous in the process. Be clear on how formal or informal your writing must be. Avoid using first (“I”) and second (“you”) person unless your instructor has indicated that doing so is acceptable.

- **Level of information** refers to the intricacy of the information you use, and it should be directly related to your audience. Make sure to strike a balance between too much information and not enough information. You do not need to explain every detail, but you do need to set the stage so that your reader can understand the context of what you are saying.

Finally, realize that argument is the basis of much college writing

Most college writing assignments ask you to make an argument and to convince your reader of something. However, the assignment you receive may not have the word “argument” anywhere in it. The more you learn about your subject, the more you may become tempted to simply report what

In the second example, the author takes a different approach. Instead of three “points,” the author has brainstormed to come up with a main argument, or thesis, that answers the question “Why did the North and South fight the Civil War?”

you have learned. Remember, when you construct an argument, you cannot merely repeat what you have read. You have to have a point or a claim. The thesis that you create will be supported by what you have read.

What kind of evidence do you need?

There are many kinds of evidence, and what type of evidence will work for your assignment can vary greatly. Should you use statistics? Historical examples? Your own experiment? Personal experience?

Make sure you are clear about this part of the assignment, because how you use evidence is vital in writing a successful paper. You are not just arguing; you are arguing with prescribed types of materials and ideas. Ask your instructor what he or she will accept as evidence. Most importantly, make sure that you cite the evidence you use, no matter what type it may be.

Details about the assignment

Be clear from the beginning about important pieces of information such as page length, documentation style, and other format issues. Usually, the page requirement tells you something important: The instructor thinks the size of the paper is appropriate to the assignment. In other words, your instructor is telling you how many pages it

should take for you to answer the question as fully as you are expected to. So if an assignment is two pages long, you need to get to the point quickly, give examples and/or evidence to support it, and wrap it up. If an assignment is ten pages long, you can use more complexity in your main points and examples. However, if you have only five pages on that particular assignment, you may need to get some support.

Finally, your professors are pretty smart people. They do not fall for essays that:

- focus more on the aesthetics than on the content—pretty graphics and catchy titles cannot take the place of work that is done well.
- use huge fonts, wide margins, or extra spacing—this is immediately obvious. Your instructors use computers, too, and they are aware of what the programs are capable of.
- are “recycled”—the “recycled” paper you are trying to use probably does not cover the material in the appropriate way for the course you are enrolled in. Moreover, resubmitting a paper may constitute a violation of the school’s honor code.

QUICK REVIEW

- Read question carefully and understand active verb in the prompt
- Understand your audience
- Realize argument is the basis of much college writing so find out what kind of evidence you need and details about the assignment
- Do not assume professors will fall for essays that rely on aesthetics than on content; use huge fonts, wide margins, or extra spacing; are “recycled.”