

## Essay Planning: Reading Assignment Prompts & Descriptions

Writing prompts can be difficult to understand and even harder to respond to. This handout will walk you through how to deconstruct and understand any individual writing prompt so you are prepared to work on your writing assignment. This handout will also provide you with a space to analyze your prompt in real-time.

### Types of Writing Responses

Before you begin writing your assignment, you should be aware of different kinds of writing. Based on the prompt, the class structure, and the discipline, the expected writing response may vary. Below are the four main types of writing that you might complete. Sometimes you may work within multiple types of writing simultaneously.

#### *Expository*

This type of writing is intended to expose facts that inform the reader about a specific topic. This type of writing is often written with an objective tone and stance and focuses on providing detailed, factual information.

Examples:

- Observation reports
- Lab reports
- Informative papers

#### *Descriptive*

Descriptive writing uses language to vividly describe an image, situation, or even a concept. This type of writing is detail oriented and aims to fully engage the reader with the topic.

Examples:

- Creative writing
- Blog posts
- Reflective writing

#### *Narrative*

Oftentimes, narrative writing is written in first person and is used when recalling events or experiences. Narrative writing is usually used when the writer must tell a story or provide an account of an event.

Examples:

- Personal narrative
- Creative writing
- Interviews

### *Persuasive*

This type of writing aims to encourage the reader or audience to take a particular action toward an issue. Persuasive writing is also used when developing or contributing to logical arguments.

Examples:

- Persuasive essay
- Op-eds
- Advertisements

### **Prompt Analysis**

When you're analyzing a prompt, there are usually three major sections of information. Each section includes information that is important but may only be necessary for certain parts of your assignment. For example, if you're working on understanding the context of your prompt and the class notes you should use, then you will probably focus on the background information. However, if you are revising your paper, then you may want to focus on the logistical requirements. Mark up the prompt and highlight the prompt according to the following.

#### *Background Information*

This information is contextual and provides you, the student writer, with information about what kind of information will be needed to complete the assignment. This may be information about what class lectures you'll be referring to, what class theories to discuss, or how this assignment will prepare you for future classwork.

#### *Logistical Information*

This information includes due dates, notes on formatting styles, and requirements for the particular assignment you're completing. These notes may not always impact the content you provide for this assignment, but they will be important as you prepare to submit your assignment.

#### *To-Dos*

This part of the prompt will tell you what the professor is looking for in the assignment. The "To-Dos" will often include action verbs like "explain," "analyze," or "describe." This part of the prompt is what you will focus on as you prepare for the assignment and will help you construct a thesis statement.

### Example of Prompt Analysis

In the following example, you will find a sample prompt for a writing assignment from a first-year writing class. Since there are no headings, and the prompt is given as a block of text, the student has to go through the prompt and look for parts of information at a time. Notice how the student writer has analyzed the prompt by highlighting background information in red, logistical information in green, and to-dos in blue.

#### **Goal**

Write a compare and contrast essay analyzing how two authors use deliberate rhetorical strategies to create meaning. The sources you analyze must be two primary sources composed in the 1960s. What are the similarities and differences between these two sources? Your essay must contain a thesis with a clear argument that is developed and supported through the use of textual evidence.

Remember, the purpose of this assignment is not to simply summarize the text. The intention is to develop your own argument! To achieve this goal, it might be helpful to think about your essay as an evaluation of the text's effectiveness.

#### **Important Details**

- Proposal (250-300 words)- Due Feb. 28

- Draft (700 words min.) – Due March 7

- Peer Review – Complete in class March 9

- Final Essay (1,000 – 1,250 words) – Due March 21

Notice in this example that the major components of the assignment description that refer to in-class work or discussions are highlighted in red. However, not everything about the class needs to be highlighted in red, only the portions that apply to the paper or that the student finds significant. Additionally, the parts of the prompt that include verbs or actions that the student must take are highlighted in blue. Again, not all parts of the prompt regarding the essay are highlighted in blue. For example, the question in the middle of paragraph one is not highlighted, as the student may not find that prompting question helpful. Lastly, the requirements on organization, structure, and due dates are highlighted in green to indicate logistical requirements that may be reviewed later, like when the student writer is about to turn in their paper.

### Your To-Do List

Now that you've worked through your prompt, highlighted the appropriate sections, and considered what kind of response you will be providing, it's time to create a to-do list. The

following to-do list is a general guideline. Your to-do list may be similar, but it will use information from your to-do actions in the prompt to narrow your list items.

Tip: This to-do list can also be used to create an outline!

- Review the background information in the prompt and consider what notes or materials you will need to complete the assignment.
- Locate the action verbs (see the above sections for examples) and determine what you are being asked to *do* in this piece of writing.
- Consider what kind of response you will be providing using background information and the action verbs.
- Write out the topic for your paper and your thesis statement. For more help with crafting a thesis, see our handout on [“How To Develop a Working Thesis Statement.”](#)
- Continue brainstorming, outlining, and/or writing your assignment from there! We have several handouts that provide brainstorming, outlining, and other writing tools if you have questions. Visit our [Homegrown Handouts](#) for more information.
- Once you’re finished writing, review all logistical requirements and ensure that you’ve met the word count, followed the formatting guidelines, and adhered to any other items included by your professor.

Tip: If you’re having trouble comprehending the prompt, try taking brief notes as you work through it. You can also schedule an appointment at the Writing Center to talk out your ideas or work on an outline.

## References

Mahmassani, Addie. “Rhetorical Analysis Essay.” English 1A. San Jose State University, San Jose, CA, Spring 2023.