

Understanding Assignments

Assignment Formats

Many assignments follow a basic format. Assignment sheets often begin with an overview of the topic, include verbs that describe the task, and offer some additional suggestions, questions, or requirements. The following presents more detail on the common features of writing assignments.

1. An Overview or Background Information

Instructors often provide context for an assignment with a general discussion or background about the subject of the assignment. This introduction to the topic serves to connect the assignment to pertinent learning goals for the class and engage the writer in the assignment.

Example: Young people are notoriously disinterested in politics, yet the people we elect make crucial decisions about our lives and our society. Think about issues that affect just youth: the war in Afghanistan, Federal aid programs for college, healthcare, privacy, copyright law, and abortion rights. The foundation of our democracy is an informed and involved public. 2012 is another political cycle, and citizens will be called upon to make decisions about the best candidates to represent them. What can we do to help students at SAC become better informed and more involved voters? Can we create a forum where students can go to learn about the views of candidates on important issues?

2. A Clarification of the Learning Objectives

Good writing assignments also make explicit the learning goals for the assignment. Also, the evaluation criteria will match these learning objectives. These learning objectives may be articulated in three ways:

- 1) Clarifying the course learning objectives pursued by the assignment
- 2) Clarifying learning assignments goals as a more fine-grained level specific to the teacher
- 3) Clarifying learning goals within a sequence of learning goals

The following example presents assignment-specific objectives that are linked to Course Learning Objectives (CLOs):

Example:

Learning Objectives for Essay #2

- Review/Learn about essay writing including the essay basics of essay form, introductions, organization (CLO 1, 3)



- Continue to learn about and practice the writing process and the writing feedback loop (CLO 1, 4)
- Continue to learn about writing a story and various ways to approach narrative (CLO 2, 3)
- ...

3. The Task of the Assignment

The writer should look for a key verb or verbs within the assignment’s wording. Words like *analyze*, *summarize*, or *compare* direct the writer to think about the topic in a certain way. The writer must also pay attention to words such as *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*; these words specify tasks.

Example: You are an analyst who works for a fictional non-partisan “think tank” called the Ranger Institute. You have the job of producing reports on the candidates’ views on important issues. These reports will be presented to SAC students, staff, and faculty through the Decision2012@SAC website with the purpose of **informing** them about the candidates’ positions and **analyzing** the merits of these positions. These reports will help students learn more about the candidates’ position on issues so that they can make a more informed voting decision.

Be particularly sensitive to the implicit nature of almost all college-level writing tasks: typically, college essays are based from readings and research. Unspoken within the assignment are the tasks of *close*, *critical reading* and *analysis*. Writers are also typically expected to produce an “*argument*”—that is, express their opinion or understanding and support that “thesis” with textual evidence.

Writers should understand the *analysis work* stated within the assignment task and where they will be required to engage in close reading, analysis, and collecting and sorting information that they will need to use in their paper to create their argument.

4. Suggestions and Requirements for Performing the Task

Many instructors include some questions that writers can use as springboards as they begins to think about the topic. Instructors usually include these questions as *suggestions* rather than *requirements*.

Example: *You could choose to deal with an issue on a big and broad level. In this case, you could be dealing on a more general and far-reaching scale. For certain issues, this broad approach may work better, but in other cases, the issue is big and so complex that it would be better dealt with on a more specific level.*

You also could choose to deal with an issue on a more specific level with a narrower scope. You may find it easier to deal with one specific part of a larger issue. However, in some cases if you get too narrow, you may find it hard to find information on your issue



In some cases, however, instructors can be quite prescriptive with what they want students to do. For instance, they may provide a structure for the paper. *Writers should follow these suggestions and requirements closely because these are hints and directions instructors provide for how to be successful on the assignment.*

5. Style Tips

“Style” refers to particular approaches to usage, tone, or conventions. MLA Documentation Style, for instance, is a set of conventions for citing research sources in your work. Assignment sheets may put these requirements for style almost anywhere in an assignments sheet, but you are most likely to find them in a section outlining the assignment requirements or a separate section on style tips or requirements. Students should carefully follow these style and usage guidelines.

Examples: “Use more formal diction,” “Avoid second person,” or “Support your assertions with quotations from the text,” “Write from an unbiased position,” “Use the present tense when writing your essay,” or “Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as the ‘speaker’ or ‘the persona’ not as the author.

6. Assignment Requirements

Writing assignments always come with specific requirements. These instructions usually indicate format rules or guidelines, requirements for essay length, requirements for essay structure, number of research sources required, or other specific things that writers must do.

Example: 1. Base your work on a minimum of five credible sources, documented according to MLA Documentation Style; 2. The essay should be 1000-1250 words in length; 3. Essays will be posted into our Decision2012@SAC website

Writers must be keenly aware of these requirements and seek to meet them. If writers do not meet these requirements, they stand to lose credit on the assignment simply for not following directions.

7. An Explanation of Evaluation Criteria

An important part of any writing assignment is a clear set of criteria for assessment. This evaluation criteria should match the learning objectives which are articulated early in the assignment. Writers must know what they are shooting for and how they will be evaluated. Ideally, the writing assignment should contain a rubric or some similar set of evaluation criteria. Writers should examine this rubric carefully to see exactly how they will be graded.



Interpreting the Assignment Task

Taking time to carefully read and interpret assignment sheets is an important task that some writers often ignore. Be sure to read, and re-read, the assignment sheets, interpreting and annotate it. The main reason writers lose points on writing assignments is not poor writing but not following directions. Follow these steps to help you interpret your writing assignment:

Step 1: Read the assignment sheet aloud

Ask a few basic questions to help you gauge your understanding of the assignment.

1. What are the learning objectives for the assignment?
2. What is the purpose of this assignment?
3. Who is my audience?
4. What kind of evidence do I need to support my ideas?
5. What kind of writing style is acceptable?
6. What are the essay requirements?

Step 2: Identify and interpret key terms in the assignment sheet

Assignments sheet will set a TASK for you to do using key words like *analyze*, *summarize*, or *compare*. As you interpret your assignment sheet, you should look for and make sure that you understand exactly what the task is asking you to do. Below are questions you might ask your self:

*What do you think analyze means here? What is it asking you to do?
The assignment asks you to compare and contrast? Have you written a compare and contrast paper before? How do you structure a compare and contrast essay?
What do you think the assignment means by “provide a synthesis”?
The assignment wants you to define X? What are different ways that you can define something?*

Here is a list of key terms that often appear in assignment sheets.

Information words ask the writer to demonstrate what she knows about the subject: who, what, when, where, how, and why.

- **define**— give the subject's meaning (according to someone or something). Sometimes you have to give more than one view on the subject's meaning
- **explain**—give reasons why or examples of how something happened
- **illustrate**—give descriptive examples of the subject and show how each is connected with the subject
- **summarize**—state or briefly list the important ideas you learned about the subject
- **trace**—outline how something has changed or developed from an earlier time to its current form
- **research**—gather material from outside sources about the subject, often with the implication or requirement that you will analyze what you have found



Relation words ask the writer to demonstrate how things are connected.

- **compare**—show how two or more things are similar (and, sometimes, different)
- **contrast**—show how two or more things are dissimilar
- **apply**—use details that you've been given to demonstrate how an idea, theory, or concept works in a particular situation
- **cause**—show how one event or series of events made something else happen
- **relate**—show or describe the connections between things

Interpretation words ask writers to defend their ideas about a subject. These words request that a writer provide not only her opinion, but also concrete evidence that supports her claims.

- **assess**—summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **prove, justify**—give reasons or examples to demonstrate how or why something is the truth
- **evaluate, respond**—state your opinion of the subject as positive, negative, or degree of the two, with examples and reasons
- **support**—give reasons or evidence for something you believe (be sure to state clearly what it is that you believe)
- **synthesize**—put two or more things together that have not been put together in class or in your readings before; do not just summarize one and then the other and say that they are similar or different—you must provide a reason for putting them together that runs all the way through the paper
- **analyze**—determine how individual parts create or relate to the whole, figure out how something works, what it might mean, or why it is important
- **argue**—take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side

Step 3: Identify the instructor's expectations and requirements

Make sure you understand the writing assignment by reviewing the instructor's expectations, especially the task and requirements for format, length, structure, support, and documentation style. Check the evaluation rubric closely.

Conclusion

Understanding the assignment (and what the professor expects) is imperative for writers to work through the process of an assignment successfully. Taking time to examine and interpret the assignment sheet—*and then following its directions closely and exactly*—will help lead to success on the assignment.

This handout created from a [Guide to Designing Writing Assignments](#) and a SAC Writing Center CRLA training guide (from 2010-2018).



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