

## Understanding Assignments

After reading this article, you should be able to unravel an assignment and then craft an effective response.

### Basic Beginnings

The following suggestions will help you regardless of the assignment, department, or instructor:

- **Read the assignment carefully as soon as you receive it.** Reading the assignment at the beginning will save you time, stress, and problems later. An assignment can look pretty straightforward at first, particularly if the instructor has provided lots of information, but it still takes time and effort to complete.
- **Ask your professor or TA about anything you don't understand.** Don't hesitate to approach your instructor. S/he prefers to help you *before* you hand the paper in instead of after your work has already been graded.

### Assignment Formats

Many assignments follow a basic format. Assignments often begin with an overview of the topic, include a central verb or verbs that describe the task, and offer some additional suggestions, questions, or prompts to get you started.

#### An Overview of Some Kind

The professor begin a general discussion of the assignment's subject, such as introducing the topic or reminding you of something that was discussed in class. **For example:** "Throughout

history, gerbils have played a key role in politics” or “In the last few weeks of class, we have focused on the history of balloons...”

### **The Task of the Assignment**

This part tells you what to do when you write the paper, so look for key verb or verbs in the sentence. Words like **analyze**, **summarize**, or **compare** ask you to think about your topic in a certain way. Pay attention to words such as **how**, **what**, **when**, **where**, and **why**; these specify tasks (See the section in this handout titled “Key Terms” for more information.) For example, your professor may ask you to “analyze the effect that gerbils had on the Russian Revolution,” or “Suggest an interpretation of how balloons affected any major war.”

### **Additional Material to Think about**

Below are some questions to use as springboards as you think about a particular topic. Instructors usually include these questions as suggestions rather than requirements. Don’t feel compelled to answer every question unless your professor asks you to do so. Pay attention to the order of the questions. Sometimes they suggest the thinking process your instructor imagines you will need to follow to begin thinking about the topic. For example: “Consider the differing views held by Communist gerbils vs. Monarchist gerbils,” or “Can there be such a thing as ‘the housefly garment industry’ or is it just a home-based craft?”

### **Style Tips**

- **Be concise**
- **Write effectively**

- **Argue furiously**

### **Technical Details**

These instructions usually indicate format rules or guidelines (e.g., “Your paper must be typed in Palatino font on gray paper and must not exceed 600 pages. It is due on the anniversary of Mao Tse-tung’s death.”). The assignment’s parts may not appear in exactly this order, and each part may be very long *or* really short. Being aware of this pattern can help you understand what your instructor wants you to do.

### **Interpreting the Assignment**

Ask yourself a few basic questions as you read. Jot down the answers on the assignment sheet.

- **Why did your instructor ask you to do this particular task?**
- **Who is your audience?**
- **What kind of evidence do you need to support your ideas?**
- **What kind of writing style is acceptable?**
- **What are the rules of the paper?**

Try to look at the question from the point of view of your instructor, who has a reason for giving you an assignment a particular point in the semester. This assignment is an opportunity to show that you can handle the course material as directed. Paper assignments give you more than a topic to discuss; they ask you to *do something* with that topic. It’s helpful to remember not to read more into the assignment than what is there.

### **Why Did Your Instructor Ask You to Do This Particular Task?**

Your professor has given you an assignment so that s/he will be able to assess your understanding of the course material and give you an appropriate grade. Your instructor is also trying to create a learning experience of some kind; therefore, your professor wants you to think about something in a particular way for a particular reason. If you read the course description at the beginning of your syllabus, review the assigned readings, and consider the assignment itself, you may begin to see the purpose or your instructor's approach to the subject matter. If you still aren't sure of the assignment's goals, ask your professor or TA (For help with this, see our handout on getting feedback.).

Given your instructor's efforts, it helps to answer the question: **What is my purpose in completing this assignment?** Is it to gather research from a variety of outside sources and present a coherent picture? Is it to take material you have been learning in class and apply it to a new situation? Is it to prove a point one way or another? Key words from the assignment can help you figure this out. Look for key terms in the form of **active verbs** that tell you what to do.

### **Key Terms: Finding Active Verbs**

Below are some key words and definitions to help you think about assignment terms.

**Information words** ask you to demonstrate what you know about the subject (Such as **who**, **what**, **when**, **where**, **how**, and **why**). Here are some examples:

- **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 or examples why/how something happened

- **Illustrate:** give descriptive examples and show how each is connected with your subject
- **Summarize:** 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

The following **relation words** ask you 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

The **interpretation words** listed below will ask you to defend your own ideas about a subject. These usually require an opinion that is supported by concrete evidence, so it's helpful to remember examples, principles, definitions, or concepts from class or research and use them in your interpretations.

- **Assess:** summarize your opinion of the subject and measure it against something
- **Prove/justify:** give reasons or examples to demonstrate how/why something is the truth
- **Evaluate/respond:** state your opinion (is the subject is good, bad, or some combination 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 haven't been put together in class or in your readings before. Don't summarize one and then the other and say that they're similar or different; 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 (how something works, what it might mean, or why it's important)
- **Argue:** take a side and defend it with evidence against the other side

### **More Clues to Your Purpose**

As you read the assignment, think about what the teacher does in class. Consider the following questions:

- **What kinds of textbooks did your instructor choose for the course?** Do they provide background information, explain theories or perspectives, or argue a point of view?
- **In lecture, does your instructor ask your opinion, try to prove her point of view, or use keywords that show up again in the assignment?**
- **What kinds of assignments are typical in this discipline?** Social science classes often expect more research, while Humanities classes thrive on interpretation and analysis.
- **How do the assignments, readings, and lectures work together in the course?**

Instructors spend time designing courses, sometimes even arguing with their peers about the most effective course materials. Figuring out the overall design to the course will help you understand what each assignment is meant to achieve.

### **Who Is Your Audience?**

Most undergraduates think of their audience as the instructor. Your professor is a good person to keep in mind as you write, but it can be helpful to think of your audience as your roommate or a stranger from another planet: someone who is smart enough to understand a clear, logical argument, but not someone who already knows what's going on in your particular paper. Even if the instructor knows everything there is to know about your paper topic, s/he still has to read *your* paper and assess *your* understanding. Try to **teach** the material to your reader (For more information, see our handout on audience).

Aiming a paper at your audience happens in two ways: you make decisions about the tone and the level of information you want to convey.

- The **Tone** is the “voice” of your paper. Should you be chatty, formal, or objective? You don't want to alienate your reader by sounding condescending or superior, but you also don't want to write a paper that sounds like you're texting a friend. Eschew ostentatious erudition: some students think the way to sound academic is to use big words. Be careful, though; you can sound ridiculous, especially if you use the *wrong* big words.
- The **level of information** you use depends on who your audience is. If you imagine your audience as your instructor and s/he already knows everything you have to say, you may leave out key information that can cause your argument to be unconvincing or illogical. Alternately, you don't have to explain every single word or issue. If you're telling your roommate what happened on your favorite Sci-Fi TV show, you probably wouldn't say, “First a dark-haired white man of average height, wearing a suit and carrying a flashlight, walked into the room. Then a purple alien with fifteen arms and at least three eyes turned around. The man smiled slightly. In the background, you could hear a clock ticking. The

room was fairly dark and had at least two windows that I saw.” You also wouldn’t say, “This guy found some aliens. The end.” Find some balance of useful details that support your main point.

## **The Grim Truth**

With a few exceptions (including some lab and ethnography reports), you’ll probably have to make an argument and convince your audience. It’s easy to forget this when you’re researching and writing because you may become enmeshed in the details, focus on learning, or be busy conveying information. Try to do more than repeat what you’ve read. Your writing should have a point, and you should be able to say it in a sentence; this is called a “thesis” or a “claim” (For more detailed information, see our handout on thesis statements).

If your instructor tells you to write about some aspect of oral hygiene, you don’t want to list: “First, you brush your teeth with a soft brush and some peanut butter. Then, you floss with un-waxed, bologna-flavored string. Finally, gargle with bourbon.” Instead, you could say, “Of all the oral cleaning methods, sandblasting removes the most plaque. Therefore, it should be recommended by the American Dental Association.” Or, “From an aesthetic perspective, moldy teeth can be quite charming. However, their joys are short-lived.”

Convincing the reader of your argument is the goal of academic writing (Note: it doesn’t have to say “argument” anywhere in the assignment for you to need one). Look at the assignment and think about what kind of argument you could make about it instead of seeing it as a checklist of information you have to present (For more help, see our handout on argument).

## **What Kind of Evidence Do I Need?**

There are many kinds of evidence, and what type of evidence will work for your assignment can depend on several factors: the discipline, the parameters of the assignment, and your instructor's preference. For example, you may use statistics, historical examples, personal anecdotes, or you may even conduct your own experiment (See our handout on evidence for suggestions).

**Make sure you're clear about this part of the assignment, because your use of evidence will be crucial in writing a successful paper.** Remember that you're learning how to argue with specific types of materials and ideas. No matter what kind of evidence you use, be sure to cite it correctly. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to ask an instructor, TA, reference librarian, or Writing Center consultant what counts as acceptable evidence.

### **What Kind of Writing Style Is Acceptable?**

You can't always tell what sort of writing style your instructor expects on a particular assignment. Your professor may be really laid back in class but still expect you to sound formal in writing. Alternately, your instructor may be fairly formal in class and ask you to write a reflection paper where you need to use "I" and speak from your own experience.

Try to avoid false associations of a particular field with a style ("art historians like wacky creativity," or "political scientists are boring and just give facts") and look instead to the types of readings you have been given in class. No one expects you to write like Plato; just use the readings as a guide for what is preferable to your instructor. When in doubt, ask your professor or TA about the level of formality s/he expects.

No matter what field you are writing for or what facts you are including, try to write so that your reader can understand your main idea. Clarity should be your main goal (For specific help with style, see our handout on style.)

### **Technical Details about the Assignment**

The technical information you're given in an assignment can give you lots of little hints about approaching your task (For example, if the page length and citation format are negotiable). Some professors don't have strong preferences as long as you're consistent and fully answer the assignment. Other professors are very specific and will deduct big points for deviations.

Usually, the page length tells you how many pages it *should* take for you to answer the question as fully as you are expected to. If an assignment is two pages long, don't pad your paper with examples or reword your main idea several times. Describe one point early, defend it with the clearest example, and finish quickly. If an assignment is ten pages long, you can be more complex in your main points and example. If you can only produce five pages for that assignment, feel free to ask someone for help.

### **Tricks That Don't Work**

#### **Your Instructors Aren't Fooled When You:**

- **Spend more time on the cover page than the essay.** Graphics, cool binders, and cute titles can't replace a well-written paper.
- **Use huge fonts, wide margins, or extra spacing to pad the page length.** These tricks are immediately obvious to the eye. Most instructors use the same word processor you

do, so they know what's possible. Try to avoid fonts that low-flying airplane pilots could read.

- **Use a paper from another class that covered “sort of similar” material.** The instructor has a particular task for you to fulfill in the assignment that usually relates to course material and lectures. Your other paper may not cover this material, and turning in the same paper for more than once course may constitute an Honor Code violation. Ask your professor — it can't hurt.
- **Get all wacky and “creative” before you answer the question.** Thinking beyond the boundaries of a simple assignment can be good, but you have to do what the assignment calls for first. Check with your instructor. A humorous tone can be refreshing for someone grading a stack of papers, but it won't get you a good grade if you haven't fulfilled the task.

Reading assignments critically leads to skills in other types of reading and writing. If you get good at figuring out what the real goals of assignments are, you're going to be better at understanding the goals of all of your classes and fields of study.

This information originally appeared in a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.