



understanding assignments

Use this worksheet to help guide your reading and understanding of difficult assignment prompts.

90% of college students procrastinate assignments. Do yourself a favor and read the assignment as the first step. This SIGNIFICANTLY eases assignment anxiety and helps you plan ahead. Additionally, reading comprehension is higher on printed materials than on screens. When in doubt, print it out.

1. Where do I start?

The first step to understanding is reading. And reading for high comprehension is hard! Last, think about what the learning outcomes of this type of assignment could be. (Your professor should list the course learning outcomes in the syllabus!)

Give yourself time to read the prompt a few times, then answer these questions in the space below:

What is the purpose of the assignment?

Why did the instructor assign this?

2. What is this assignment asking you to do? What does the final product look like?

Are you proving a point? Proposing a solution to a problem? Gathering research to tie into a larger context?

What action verbs are in the instructions? List any here (examples include: argue, define, describe, explain, analyze, summarize, compare/contrast, juxtapose, prove, support).

3. What do the assignment guidelines specify? What criteria do you need to meet/pitfalls do you need to avoid?

Think about format (essay, Powerpoint, short response, literature review, etc), length, and citation style. If it's a group project, consider how the work needs to be divided. Fill in the blanks below:

The length:

The citation style:

The medium (printed essay, Powerpoint, etc):

Other formatting requirements:

4. Who are you writing to? (Not including the person grading it).

If this were a professional piece of writing, who would you be writing it for? This could be a specific person, a board of directors, the readership of a publication, the scholarly community, the general public, etc. Answer the following questions in the space below.

What would the audience already know about the topic? (This can determine the tone, vocabulary, and level of information you'll use):

Do I need to convince them of something? What is it?

What facts, statistics, and messages could help me do that?

5. What style should it be written in?

This concerns the tone, vocabulary, and, level of information you'll use. Look for comments in the instructions regarding style hints. Answer the following questions in the space below.

Style hints: (examples include be concise, argue passionately, offer advice, etc):

6. What kind of information will you need?

This will depend on your field of study and the nature of the assignment. Your assignment will probably require some outside information, such as statistics, polling data, historical examples, professional opinions, etc. To identify the gaps in your existing knowledge, try freewriting for 5 minutes, focusing on these questions:

What do I already know about this?

What don't I know?

What do I think I know about the assignment?

Where do I go to find the information I need?

[freewriting space]

7. Structure

This also depends on the topic/field/subject area conventions. What should be in the beginning, middle, and end of your assignment? Why? Answer the following questions in the space below.

What paragraphs do I need to plan for? (examples include Introduction, Background, Problem Explanation, Analysis, Literature Review, Body Paragraphs)

Tips for getting started:

- Drop yourself a voice memo about what you think this assignment will require, what obstacles you're worried about, and how you might confront those obstacles
- Rewrite the assignment in your own words, as if to help someone else understand it. Be silly, use slang, do whatever you want to make it easy to understand and accessible.
- Make a study plan. At first, make a list of what you think you'll need to do. Then read it over and ask yourself the following questions: Is each step in the right place? Is each step necessary? Are any of these steps too intimidating, and if so, how do I break them up into small chunks?
- Get help from fellow students by going to the Writing Center or to a Writing Accountability Group! QR codes for signing up below:



Writing Center



Accountability
Groups:

