



## Strategies for Understanding Prompts

When writing an essay, one of the most important steps is understanding the prompt. Essay prompts provide us with the “roadmap” to the essay assignment, and are made up of multiple components, varying in terms of content area, format, discipline and style. Taking time to digest a prompt, identify its key components, and make note of its defining features is vital to writing a strong essay. Here are some recommended steps to take when evaluating and understanding your essay assignment and its prompt.

### Step 1: Find the Prompt

When receiving an essay assignment, the instructions can often take up many pages, with information regarding due dates, guidelines, and requirements. A great first step is to identify where in this document the prompt is located—it may potentially be written in a question format, and will directly state what your essay should be about.

### Step 2: Evaluate & Annotate the Prompt

After locating the prompt, take time to evaluate and understand the prompt:

- Underline or highlight key words (find the “purpose”)
- Identify essay style (argument, comparison, summary, narrative, analysis, etc.)
- Look up definitions of words in the prompt that are unfamiliar
- Determine the overarching question(s): is there more than one question being asked in the prompt?
- Ask your professor questions (Is something in the prompt unclear or confusing?)

### Step 3: Identify Assignment Supporting Details

After evaluating the prompt, it is important to read the rest of your essay assignment for supporting guidelines that will impact both the prompt and the way you write your essay.

Here are some important details to identify in your essay assignment:

- Identify the format requirement (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.)
- Determine what sources (and how many) are required (class text, primary sources, scholarly articles, books, electronic sources, etc.)
- Make note of page length requirements & assignment due date
- Check for required “work-in-progress” due dates (does the assignment require the submission of a preliminary or annotated bibliography, a rough draft, or a conference with a Writing Advisor?)
- Determine the level of flexibility of the essay’s contents (does the assignment include a template for the order and focus of your essay’s paragraphs?)

### Future Steps

- Return to the prompt: as you write your thesis, select your evidence, and write your essay, keep your prompt close by and double check to make sure your developing essay continues to answer the prompt specifically and directly.