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Understanding the Prompt

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The purpose of this article is to guide readers through the essential steps to analyze writing prompts, identify the key components, and respond comprehensively.

Asking Questions

One of the crucial steps in starting any writing assignment is to ensure you fully understand the professor's expectations and requirements. Professors assign essays because they want you to arrive at answers to problems through a careful process of logical thinking. The specific objectives outlined in the prompt, when well-defined, help you know how to create a focused response. If you can understand the *Why* behind the *What*, you can learn the *How*. By analyzing the assignment guidelines, identifying instructions, and clarifying any questions, you can map out a clear writing strategy and process. This not only enhances the overall quality of your writing but also increases your chances of meeting or exceeding your professor's expectations.

Analyzing Language

Understanding your professor's expectations and criteria begins with a thorough analysis of the Assignment prompt. Start by carefully reading the prompt a few times. Then, **identify key terms and phrases** to grasp their overall meaning and requirements. While reading, look for phrases or words such as "analyze," "compare and contrast," "discuss," and "evaluate." Doing so will help you determine the type of response required. These keywords provide insight into the priorities of the assignment and will guide your approach to achieving the appropriate structure, depth, and tone for your writing. Additionally, you should pay close attention to specific instructions regarding length and format. By dissecting the prompt as a rhetorician, determining what is being asked of you, and discerning what questions you should be asking, you can appropriately tailor your approach to the writing assignment.

Once you have a solid understanding of the prompt, the next step is to **isolate the different components** of the assignment. These components typically include the main topic or question, the required format, and any sub-points or specific questions. Making a note of these components can aid you in breaking down the prompt into manageable parts, ensuring that you cover all necessary aspects of the prompt. Should you have any confusion or questions about the key components of the prompt, **seek clarity** by asking your professor specific questions. Seeking clarification is essential to avoid misunderstandings that could affect your grade. By clearly identifying and thoroughly understanding these key components, you can create a detailed **outline** that will serve as a roadmap for your writing, keeping you organized and on track.

Example

Imagine you have been asked to compose a movie review for a film, philosophy, literature, or Christian Studies course. According to the prompt, the student is required to

Write a 750-word movie review of one of the three films assigned in this course. A film review is not a thorough, lengthy analysis of the film. It is an initial commentary covering the basics of plot and character to introduce a potentially interested viewer to the film. It is frequently subjective and often says as much about the critic as about the film. Its goal is publicity: for the film and for the critic and is written with a congratulatory or critical eye (sometimes both) that should make the reader want to hurry (or avoid) the film. As an example, see Roger Ebert's review of O Brother, Where Art Thou linked in Blackboard.

Keep in mind that a film review often contains:

- 1. A quick synopsis of plot (typically without spoilers), though the review need not be structured chronologically*
- 2. A discussion of the characters, including the actors and a review of their abilities*
- 3. Memorable aspects of the film that stand out (musical score, cinematography, star appeal, etc.) The highlights and the lowlights.*
- 4. A final opinion and analysis.*

Note that the prompt identifies the required length (750 words), gives the purpose (introducing the film), includes four features expected for a successful film review, and provides an example for the student to follow. If any of these aspects are still unclear to you, talk with your professor.

Tips

1. Review your notes. Most professors integrate ideas from the course into the assignment, so return to what was covered in class to know how the prompt speaks to those concepts.
2. Ask questions. If something about the assignment is unclear, seek clarification by meeting with your professor after class or during office hours.
3. Be concise. Provide clear and direct answers to the prompt questions.
4. Follow the structure: Ensure your response answers all the requirements of the prompt with a proper introduction, body, and conclusion.

Works Consulted

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