

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ASSIGNMENT PROMPT

Before you leave class...

In many cases, your instructor will go over assignment guidelines during class time. Make sure to **take notes** and mark any points your instructor emphasizes. Ultimately, your instructor is the best source for fully understanding a particular writing assignment. Here are some questions you can use to clarify expectations with your instructor any time you have a writing assignment:

- **Who is my audience?** For example, is your primary audience your instructor? Or are you writing for a wider audience, such as the UTC campus community or a subset of your academic discipline? Knowing your audience can help you decide on what level of vocabulary to use or what terms to define.
- **How will the assignment be graded?** Is there a rubric? What differentiates an A paper from a B paper and so on? What does the assignment prompt emphasize or make clear is an important learning outcome?
- **Are outside sources required?** If so, how many? What type? Should they be academic or popular? What citation style is expected?
- **What degree of formality is expected?** For example, some forms of academic writing discourage the use of personal pronouns like “I,” whereas in a reaction paper or personal narrative, using “I” may be appropriate.
- **What are the common issues or challenges that students tend to have with the assignment?** Knowing this may help you avoid the same pitfalls.

If you have other questions or don't understand something, be sure to **ask right away**. For a short question, you may want to ask in class, but for a longer discussion, it may be best to make an appointment or visit your instructor during office hours.

Other tips

Look at the specific **verbs** used on the assignment sheet or rubric. This can help you determine what kind of writing will be expected of you.

summarize, explain, describe: These verbs mean that you are being asked to illustrate your knowledge and understanding of information that you have learned in class or outside readings

respond, evaluate, analyze: These verbs mean that you are being asked to develop an argument or interpretation of your own

compare, contrast, relate: These verbs mean that you are being asked to make and illustrate connections between ideas, concepts, or readings

Consider the prompt fully: what material(s) does the prompt ask you to write about? Does your professor provide any examples of potential topics? Some prompts have clearly defined topics

to choose from; others leave it up to you, the writer, to decide what you would like to write about. Pay particular attention to vocabulary in the prompt that relates to material from class, as this will help guide the focus of your paper. What terms do you recognize? Use these as a jumping off point for deciding your paper's topic.

Finally, consider your instructor's purpose in giving you this assignment. Your instructor may include a description of the purpose on the assignment sheet, but if not, consider how the assignment fits into the content and progression of the course.

For example, if your class is reading a book together, an early assignment might ask students to summarize key points from the book to make sure everyone understands it. However, a later assignment might ask students to analyze why the author used a particular writing technique. Try to keep purpose in mind as you plan to begin to write your paper.