

Understanding the Assignment



Understanding the guidelines for any writing task is an essential step of the writing process. At first glance, writing assignments can seem confusing, but recognizing key components can help you better understand the assignment requirements and expectations. Although this handout provides useful guidelines, always tailor your work to your audience and assignment.

Common Components of Assignment Descriptions

While assignment descriptions vary in style and length, they should generally include the following components:

Overview

The overview is an introduction to the topic that creates a context in which to understand the assignment.

Example: Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle argued that ethos, logos, and pathos were the three main ways to persuade an audience.

Task

The task is the specific action, approach, or response to the topic, issue, question, problem, etc. that essentially tells you what to do for the assignment.

Key Words: Identifying essential words will help you understand what you are being asked to do. When you read the prompt, **underline or circle key words** to identify the task. These key words will dictate the content and organization of your essay. Below are key words commonly found in assignment prompts:

Compare	Discuss similarities.
Contrast	Discuss differences.
Criticize	Discuss advantages and disadvantages.
Define	Explain the meaning. Describe attributes used to compare or contrast it to similar concepts.
Discuss	Give pros and cons that describe the relative strengths and weaknesses.
Explain	Describe reasons or causes, significance, and other areas of important or complex concepts.
Illustrate	Give concrete examples of or expound on a topic.
Interpret	Clarify the meaning you find in the ideas or evidence you are writing about.
Justify	Give reasons why an act, a judgment, a behavior, etc., is rational or significant.
List	Write several features, events, actions, characteristics, etc. which together explain or define ideas.

Example: Define *imperialism* and contrast the colonial strategies of England and Spain in the 1600s.

Details

Details may include the specific requirements, expectations, or instructions of an assignment. These can range from the page-length requirement and citation style to the number of sources used and aspects of writing style.

Additional Information

Your professor may also include commentary, questions, or observations about the topic; guidelines or instructions for getting started; and common pitfalls or practices to avoid.

Example: Consider these questions when drafting your paper: Why would the author choose to write this way? What effect does it have on the audience?

As you follow these guidelines and communicate with your professor, instructor, or TA, you will better understand the purpose of writing assignments and be able to meet assignment and audience expectations.