

Before sitting down to write a paper for a class, it is important you know exactly what it is you are supposed to do. The first step to writing a successful paper is reading the assignment carefully and paying attention to the clues it gives you about task, structure, and style.

- **READ** the assignment carefully as soon as you get it. Don't put it off! You want to ask yourself two questions. First: How long is writing this paper probably going to take? Make sure that you give yourself enough time to do a good job. Second: Are there any aspects of the assignment you don't understand—from how the professor wants you to approach the question to what citation style to use? If so...
- **ASK** your instructor about anything that is unclear. Don't hesitate to approach your instructor during office hours or send a quick e-mail for clarification. It is in your best interest to clarify the requirements before you do a lot of work, possibly the wrong direction. Don't put off asking for clarification until too close to the deadline.

Assignment Components

Overview

What, in a nutshell, is this assignment asking you to do? Try to paraphrase your assignment out loud or explain it to a roommate or family member. Think about why your professor is invested in having you think through this question or problem. How does the assignment fit into the overall goals of the course and the sequence of assignments? How important is this paper for your grade? What are you trying to prove about what you've learned by writing it? If, for example, you're working on the first of three papers, all of similar length and scope, then you can infer that your instructor really wants you to master this format in order to present your knowledge. If this assignment differs from others, think about what new skills or modes of inquiry you're being asked to try out—and why.

Key Terms

Paraphrasing your assignment is an excellent way to identify any key terms that are confusing or will require some serious thought as you begin working on the assignment. **The exact language of your prompt is often as specific and important as the language in, for example, the instructions manual for filling out your taxes.** You are responsible for understanding what you're being asked and responding accordingly. Circle or highlight the terms that seem most important for you to understand before you begin working on the paper. What meaning do they have in the context of your course? Refer to your class notes to think about how your professor has already used these words in the past. After you've spent some time thinking about the language of the prompt, get in touch with your professor for any necessary clarification.

Audience and Style

For whom are you writing this paper? The answer might seem obvious: you'll submit your work

to a professor or TA, who will, in all likelihood be the only person to ever read it. But part of the bigger picture of academic writing is entering into a conversation within a preexisting community of thinkers. Imagining such a community for yourself is one of the best ways to avoid feeling like you're simply regurgitating information from class when you write a paper. Ask your instructor to clarify what kind of readership he or she has in mind for the assignment. For example, your Cognitive Psychology professor might ask you to envision either a readership of researchers, with some degree of expertise in your topic, or, alternatively, a readership of a magazine such as the *New Yorker*—fairly literate and generally informed, but with no specific training in the field. Obviously, these two audiences will place quite different demands on both the style and content of your writing. Once you have a general idea of your audience, see the excellent “Checklist for Understanding Your Readers” in *The Craft of Research*¹ for some helpful guidelines for thinking about how audience affects your style.

Evidence

Knowing what kind of evidence you're being asked to use is a crucial step in determining how much time and work your paper is going to require. If you're simply being asked to work closely with texts you've already read (and perhaps discussed) in the context of the course, you know that you won't have to spend much time going to the library to hunt down, evaluate, and analyze additional source materials. If you're being asked to use “outside sources,” budget your time accordingly and ask a lot of questions about [what kind of sources](#) you might want to use. If you are having difficulty locating appropriate sources, ask a reference librarian for help. Remember to keep track of citation information for all sources you draw upon.

Additional Resources:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/understanding-assignments/>

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-read-assignment>

¹ Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams, *The Craft of Research*, 2nd Ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003: 32.