

Brandywine Writing Studio Writing Guide: Responding to Assignments

When you read your assignment strategically, you're more likely to respond fully and accurately to the prompt. It's also important to *return to your prompt repeatedly* during your drafting process to get inspired, stay focused, and consider areas for revision. This online handout offers a guide on how to critically read your prompts and assignments; we will also review a list of key verbs commonly found in writing assignments.

1. Read the Entire Assignment

- Read your assignment prompt as soon as you receive it!
- Mark up key words and important details. This can help you develop an outline for your work.
- Note the deadlines indicated on the assignment. This includes both the final submission deadline as well as dates that drafts (full or partial) might be due. Use a calendar app or planner to stay on track.
- Review your assignment often; take time half-way through your draft and after completing a draft to compare your assignment with how you've specifically addressed each prompt.

2. Ask Questions

- *Ask your instructor* questions about the assignment when you first receive it and during your drafting process. Refer to your syllabus to learn your professor's preferred method for communication.
- Last-minute questions stall your writing; there may not be enough time to make meaningful changes based on the feedback you receive.

3. Focus on Verbs

- Verbs like "explain," "analyze," "evaluate," and more represent the tasks and activities required in your writing. View the table of common prompts below to learn more about how to write for different assignments.
- *Note what specific verbs you see* by circling, underlining, or highlighting them in your assignment. Are there multiple verbs? How are they related to one another?

- Some assignments ask supportive questions: these are usually meant only to inspire your thinking. It's important to identify what the primary and secondary prompts are found in your assignment. Ask your professor if every question detailed in your assignment should be answered directly.

Table: Essay Prompts Demystified

While verbs vary in written assignments, virtually all prompts expect you to *construct an argument*, *use evidence* to support your claim, and *interpret* your evidence to clarify connections. When you first read your assignment, take some time to also connect your knowledge to the new task. You can ask yourself, "How is this like other writing tasks I've done? How is it different?"

PROMPT	YOUR RESPONSE
Analyze	Comment on something by examining its features or parts. What does your close observation say about the subject as a whole?
Compare/Contrast	Show the similarities and/or differences among two or more things.
Define	Name a subject's meaning and significance, considering questions such as who, what, when, where, why, and how.
Discuss	Construct a focused argument and consider its implications to a larger subject or the course theme(s).
Evaluate	Articulate an opinion about material and persuade the reader why it's true.
Explain	Detail how something works or occurred by giving reasons.
Prove/Justify	Substantiate your claim about something using evidence.
Relate	Establish connections between parts of a subject, or across various subjects.
Research	Consult and incorporate outside, credible material (sources) to analyze, define, evaluate, or more (as your prompt indicates).
Summarize	Share the most important ideas and how they are presented in an unbiased manner.

4. Consider Your Audience and Purpose

- Ask yourself, "Who else might my audience include in addition to my instructor?" Consider how informed your reader already is and decide how formal your tone should be for this assignment.
- Based on the type of essay (genre), how would you describe the goals of the assignment in your own words? For example, if you're asked to write a literature review, you might say, "I'm researching what others have said about a topic and reporting my findings cohesively."

5. Mind the Formatting Requirements

- Technical details like page and word requirements, citation style, and more also indicate the type of writing you'll do.

6. Get Support

- Use academic and student support services, including the [Brandywine Writing Studio](#), [Brandywine Learning Center](#), and [Penn State Brandywine's Counseling Services](#) to help you navigate the academic and personal demands of the assignment.

Studio Tip: Annotate Your Own Draft

Try using digital or analog colored pens or highlighters to circle or underline places in your paper that address different parts of your assignment. This can help you visualize how complete your responses are, and how balanced your approach is to answering different questions from the prompt. You can also schedule a [Brandywine Writing Studio appointment](#) and review your draft with a trained writing tutor.

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