

Understanding Your Assignment

Every assignment poses a challenge and presents an opportunity to show that you can think clearly and concisely, and on your own, about the course material. Writing assignments do more than give you a topic to discuss in vague terms—they invite you to *formulate an idea* about your topic.

Ask yourself a few basic questions as you read your assignment and jot down the answers on your assignment sheet.

1. What is the point or purpose of the assignment?

It is true that instructors give assignments in order to be able to assess students' understanding of the course material and give appropriate grades. But instructors also design assignments to be learning experiences – to give students the opportunity really to process and digest the course material and to devise their own thoughts about it.

If you are not sure how or where to begin approaching your assignment, consider asking yourself these questions (and remember that talking with your instructor, with classmates, or with a writing consultant or librarian can also help you to determine the scope of your assignment and set goals for its completion):

- What kinds of materials are you engaging with in the course—ones that provide background information? explain theories or perspectives? argue a point of view? How does this assignment fit into the context of the course in general?
- What are you invited to do in class—does your instructor ask your opinion or for proof of your point of view? Have you discussed the meanings of specific terms or key words? Do certain themes stand out from the rest? Does a particular approach come to light?
- What kinds of assignments are typical in this discipline—is there an emphasis on research? on interpretation and analysis? on a combination of careful reporting and synthesis?
- How do the assignments, readings, lectures, projects, and discussions work together in the course? Are there interesting connections among the various materials?

As you read the assignment carefully, consider the following:

- What, specifically, does the assignment ask you to do? What does it not ask you to do? Is your task to gather research from a variety of outside sources and present a coherent picture? Are you being asked to take material from class and apply it to a new situation? Are you supposed to prove a point using evidence from a particular source?
- What are the key words in the assignment? Look for key terms in the form of *active verbs* that tell you what to do. (For help with this, check out the Writing Studio's *Writing Terms Dictionary* in the Writers' Shelf section of our online Resources page.)
- Are there additional suggestions and questions? Some assignment sheets offer many suggestions and additional questions to help you think about your point or purpose as you write. Unless you are specifically asked to do so, you may not have to answer every one of these questions or respond to each suggestion. This

part of the assignment can, however, give you a stronger sense of important elements and ideas to address in your writing.

Argument

With a few exceptions (including some lab and ethnography reports), assignments typically ask students to make arguments. It is extremely easy to forget this aim when you are researching and writing; as you become involved in your subject matter, you may become enmeshed in the details and focus on learning or simply re-telling the information you have found. But, you need to do more than just repeat what you have read. Your writing should have a point – a thesis or a claim, and you should be able to say it in a sentence or two.

Convincing the reader of your argument is a goal of academic writing. It doesn't have to say "argument" anywhere in the assignment for you to need one. Look at the assignment and think about what kind of argument you could make about your topic instead of just seeing the assignment as a checklist of information you have to record and present.

2. Who is your audience?

It is true that your instructor is a good person to keep in mind as you write. But think also of a fellow classmate or someone else who is smart enough to demand a clear, logical argument and who is familiar with the course material. What can you say about your topic that would be interesting to that reader? In what order do you need to present your ideas and evidence so that they will be most convincing?

3. What kind of evidence do you need?

Ask yourself: “what sort of evidence is necessary?” and remember that there are many different types of proof or evidence. Consider whether or not your assignment directs you to use course materials or outside research, passages or examples from texts that you’ve studied in class, anecdotal experience, experiments, hypothetical situations, statistics, case studies, etc.

Make sure that you are clear about this part of the assignment, because your instructor likely expects you to engage with specific types of materials and ideas. You may also consider asking a subject librarian for help determining what types of evidence to use.

4. Are there formatting requirements and supplemental instructions?

Be sure to follow all formatting rules or guidelines about margins, spacing, fonts, and citation styles. Be especially careful about length requirements. If there is a minimum page requirement, be sure to meet it fully. In other words, an assignment that asks for 5-6 pages probably requires at least five *full* pages of writing adequately to address the topic at hand.

5. Are there any hints about style?

Instructors often give style hints in their assignments. If your instructor indicates that you need to be “clear and concise,” then you should take care to check for vagueness or unnecessary embellishments in your writing.

Adapted from the Writing Center handout “Understanding Your Assignment” at UNC Chapel Hill