Understanding Writing Assignments

Before you can successfully select a topic, you must understand exactly what the assignment requires. Types of writing assignments vary from department to department, from course to course, and from instructor to instructor, so it is important to understand thoroughly the requirements of a particular assignment.

If the topic is not provided by the instructor

Sometimes instructors leave the selection of meaningful topics or research questions up to you. In such cases, you can find a topic by doing the following:

- Begin by asking yourself why you were interested in this particular course in the first place. Your interest in the course might provide a clue about what to investigate.
- Look over class notes for provocative or interesting ideas.
- Focus on points from the notes that you find interesting or puzzling.
- Consider points about which the instructor has said "No one has adequately explained or explored X yet" or "It would be interesting to find out more about Y."
- Consider the personal relevance this course might have for you.
- Ask yourself if you can test or expand a model or concept studied in class.
- Glance through books and journals in the area studied in class to find out what scholars are talking about and whether anything is missing from that scholarly conversation. If something is missing, that might be your topic.
- Ask your instructor or TA for suggestions.
- Explore some disagreement with a particular author or scholar in the field.

If the topic is provided by the instructor

If the assignment is explained but is not given to you in written form, remember that your instructors or TAs are the best source of information about their expectations for the assignment. In class or during office hours, ask questions and take notes about the key aspects of the assignment:

- the paper's purpose
- the intended audience for the essay
- the amount of research required
- length requirements
- possible approaches

and the criteria used to grade your paper:

- originality of thought
- amount of research
- use of concepts
- style

If the assignment is written out for you on the syllabus or on an assignment sheet, the following procedure should help.

1. Read the assignment more than once.

Highlight or underline key assignment words such as

- argue (agree/disagree)
- criticize
- define
- describe
discuss  evaluate
explain  compare and contrast
reflect on  summarize

Such words tell you what kind of tasks your instructor expects you to perform.

Then highlight all other key technical terms that are course-specific or discipline-specific. Check these words in a good dictionary, even if you think you know what they mean. Some words have multiple meanings and special discipline-related meanings that you may not know.

2. Consider suggestions for topics given by the assignment itself.

Sometimes instructors structure topics or assignments to reflect one possible approach to the paper. Occasionally the assignment will tell you, directly or indirectly, what topics or aspects to consider and in what order. If your assignment does this, use the assignment to make a topic outline for your paper.

3. Consider which concepts or methods the assignment asks you to use.

Are you being asked to argue a point, to compare similarities and differences, or to explore your own reactions to an event, text, or idea? Does the topic ask you to go into depth about some material already covered? Does it ask you to evaluate a theory or model by applying it to a real-world example? Does it ask you to use research?

Essay assignments usually ask you to use the concepts, techniques, and ways of thinking that are featured in the course. Use these to ask yourself questions about the topics. Look also for controversies within the material studied.

4. Form a tentative thesis statement or central idea in the early stages of writing.

Having a thesis or hypothesis to support or prove will focus your thinking and help you say something significant. As you move through the writing process, you may discover that your thesis must be changed. That's not an unusual occurrence.

5. Devise your own topic, if that's allowed.

Some instructors are willing to let you create your own topic, rather than write on one of the suggested topics. If you have a topic you would like to explore, ask your instructor if you might substitute it for one of the suggested topics. If the instructor refuses your request, remember that there are probably several good pedagogical reasons for his/her wanting all the students working on the specific topics already assigned. Return to the steps above and select one of the topics that seems most promising to you. Remember, though, if you do suggest your own topic, make it at least as difficult and complex as the topic(s) suggested by the instructor.

Once you have analyzed the assignment, you are ready to begin the writing process.