

Swarthmore College Writing Center

Understanding Your Assignment

The first step in the writing process is to carefully examine the assignment. Don't underestimate the importance of spending a few minutes to think about what your professor is looking for. A well-written paper can receive a lower grade simply because it does not meet the requirements of the assignment. Here are some strategies for decoding a prompt:

- **Look for key words.** Look for words in the assignment that indicate what type of writing the professor wants you to produce. Such words help you frame your paper, find your audience, and generate the type of writing your professor expects. For example, there is a difference between "summarize" and "analyze." Be aware of the meanings of words like "discuss", "evaluate", "explain", "describe", and "define." If you aren't sure what your professor means by a certain word in the assignment, don't be afraid to ask for clarification.
- **Know the purpose of the paper.** Once you've figured out what the assignment is telling you, think about how you will write to fulfill the expectations of your audience. The assignment may require you to persuade your reader, compare and contrast ideas, or summarize an author's point of view. Considering your purpose at this point will make it easier for you to figure out what kind of thesis you'll need when you start to write the paper.
- **Fulfill the criteria in the prompt.** This point may seem self-evident, but it's important! It's easy to get off-topic when you're in the brainstorming stage. When considering your ideas, look back at the assignment to make sure you're still within the parameters set by your professor. Be aware of the specific details of the assignment and know your audience, word limit, and other guidelines.
- **Ask for clarity.** Sometimes professors make assignments vague or open-ended so that you have an opportunity to work on a topic that interests you. If you don't understand the assignment, if you're having trouble developing a topic, or if you're worried that your topic may stray from your assignment, ask your professor for guidance or visit the Writing Center.