

Understanding Assignments



To succeed as a writer in college, you have to understand what is being asked of you and why, and a big part of that process is strategically reading your assignment description to understand the demands of the assignment. This handout provides questions to help you do so.

Approaching the Assignment Description

- **What does the assignment ask you to do?** Pay attention to key words and phrases, especially action verbs such as *research, analyze, illustrate, argue, classify, defend, compare, contrast, describe, discuss, assess, explain, survey, etc.* These verbs reveal moves you'll need to make as you work through the writing process.
- **Has the instructor emphasized any particular aspects of the assignment?** Sometimes, instructors will highlight important elements through a bulleted list or important questions to consider.
- **What knowledge, information, or resources do you need?** Are you expected to do research? Are you expected to generate material for writing through a specific process? Should you incorporate class readings? Has your instructor provided sample papers or other resources? Where and how will you get what you need?
- **What is your purpose?** What should the writing accomplish? Is the goal to inform readers? Entertain them? Or persuade them to action?
- **Who is your audience?** Does the prompt specify an audience besides your instructor? What is your audience's background and how will that background shape your writing?
- **What is the genre?** Is this assignment a lab report? A book review? A literature review? A personal statement? Each of these requires a different format and style. Being familiar with the genre impacts many other writing choices.
- **How can you make the assignment interesting or useful to you?** It's much easier to work on an assignment that you're engaged with, so consider directions that would pique your interest or provide you with knowledge or experience that you might build on or use again later.
- **What questions do you still have about the assignment?** Write out any questions you have about the assignment. If an additional read through of the assignment does not answer your questions, consider who you might approach for clarification and assistance: your instructor, a classmate, a writing assistant at the writing center, all three?
- **What are the assignment's practical requirements?** Consider length, format, citation style, and deadline.
- **Given the expectations of the assignment, how should you approach the writing process?** How long will the process take? (Keep in mind that we often underestimate how long we'll need to complete a writing project.) How can you divvy up the various tasks in the assignment?

Adapted from The St. Martin's Handbook by Andrea A. Lunsford