

Approaching a Writing Prompt

You've been given a writing assignment... what comes next?

Find out what your professor expects by:

- Reviewing your professor's comments on **past assignments**
- Examining the **syllabus**
- Finding out the **style**: *MLA? APA? Chicago?**
- Listening carefully during **lectures**
- Discussing the project with your **classmates**
- Asking **questions** if you need to
- Finding out whether or not you need to incorporate **research** into your writing. If so, what kind (informal or scholarly?) and how many sources?
- Picking apart the **prompt**, which means paying close attention to the words in the prompt so you can fulfill the professor's expectations.



First, understand what you are being asked to do. Here are commonly used key terms in writing prompts:

- **Analyze:** Divide the topic into separate parts and show relationships between these parts and their relationship to the whole topic. Analyzing requires acute observation and detailed description. Analytical essays often use classification, compare and contrast, definition, and/or cause and effect for development.
- **Argue:** Write to prove a point or persuade a reader to accept or entertain your position.
- **Compare:** Show similarity. Address the same ideas or aspects of each event or idea that you are comparing.
- **Contrast:** Show difference. Address the same ideas or aspects of each event or idea that you are contrasting.
- **Describe:** Tell about in detail. Keep your description organized, for example: you can organize your detail by time, space, order of importance, answers to questions, etc. Effective descriptions appeal to your reader's senses: sight, touch, sound, smell, or taste. Keep in mind the purpose of your description so you can focus on significant details.
- **Discuss:** Write a logical, focused commentary on your topic. This requires you to consider the topic from various points of view and to recognize in your writing the specific differences that you have identified.
- **Evaluate:** reach conclusions about something's value or worth. Substantiate all evaluations with evidence based on careful observation and analysis that follow the criteria you have established to use in your judgment/evaluation.
- **Explain or Show:** Tell how or why.
- **Illustrate:** Provide detail or examples to clarify a concept.
- **Justify:** Provide reasons, facts, and statistics in support of your position.
- **Summarize:** State main points. Do not evaluate or judge.
- **Synthesize:** Combine separate elements into a single or unified entry.

Next, find the limits of the topic

For example, if the prompt says, "Discuss elephant health in Africa," then all of the facts you write into your essay should **directly impact or help to explain** the health of elephants in Africa.

A sample prompt for practice is provided on the next page

Tearing Apart a Prompt

-an example for practice *



Approaching a writing prompt can be intimidating, whether it is for a writing assignment due later in the semester, an on-demand writing assignment for an exam in class, or for the WPST. Use this example below to practice the coping methods used in determining what is being asked in the prompt and the strategies for brainstorming.

Sample Prompt

Issue: Any public crisis such as war, an earthquake, a disease epidemic, a flood, or a shortage of resources can affect large numbers of people in society. All of these crises threaten human lives and safety and may cause disruption or violence.

However, they may also produce positive effects. For example, many times, people will draw upon strengths they were unaware of; strangers may join forces to find a solution; some may find themselves re-evaluating what is important in life, etc.

Writing Directions: Choose a public crisis that has affected your life or the lives of people you know or have heard or read about or studied in your high school or college courses. **Analyze the crisis and explain the effects.** You may discuss a public crisis that occurred in any country in the world.

Questions to ask yourself

- What exactly are you being asked to do? Find key words and underline them.
- What does analyze the crisis mean? *To take apart the crisis into separate parts, define them; show how each part relates to the crisis. Think about parts that make up a whole, describe each part, and then explain how they all fit to make a whole.*
- Can you think of a crisis that you feel you can talk about? *Example: The school shooting in Newtown, CT.*
- What made up this crisis, what are the parts? List some: *What really happened? Who was involved? What led up to it? Are movies to blame? Is information on the Internet too easy to get? Should we control guns? Are parents too lax in control of their children? Was the shooter an outsider by choice or was he treated badly at home, at school, etc.? How did something like this happen?*
- What has happened since the crisis? Think of some of the effects. List some: *Gun control legislation. Community coming together. Memorial site established. Students all over the country talking about safety and being more willing to talk to adults about guns. Movies, video games, and Internet unchanged.*
- What questions should you include? Can we answer some of the questions? The answers will be your support.
- Do you think you have enough to write an essay?
- What would be your thesis statement? *The parts of the crisis you plan to discuss.*

* -created by De Ette Silbaugh