

Chapter 7: Analyzing Assignments



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Snowflakes, Fingerprints, and Assignments

Writing assignments in college differ as much as instructors. There is no one guidebook, approach, or set of rules that college teachers will consult when putting together their coursework. Since each assignment will always be unique, it is important to devote time to thoroughly understanding what is being asked of you before beginning. Don't wait until the night before the work is due to begin asking questions and delving in. The sooner you understand and approach the assignment's requirements, the less time you will spend second-guessing (and needlessly revising) your writing.

Analyzing an Assignment

You will likely encounter many different kinds of writing assignments in college, and it would be nearly impossible to list all of them. However, regardless of genre, there are some basic strategies one can use to approach these assignments constructively.

- **Read the assignment sheet early and thoroughly.** An assignment sheet may be lengthy, but resist the temptation to skim it. Observe and interpret every detail of the text. Moreover, it is essential to focus on the key words of the subject matter being discussed. It would be unfortunate to hand in an incomplete or misguided assignment because you did not properly read and understand the guidelines. Since you can easily overlook details on the first reading, read the assignment sheet a second time. As you are reading, highlight areas where you have questions, and also mark words you feel are particularly important. Ask yourself why your professor has given this assignment. How does it relate to what you are studying in class? Pay

attention to key words, such as *compare*, *contrast*, and *analyze*. Who is your audience? Should the paper be written in a formal or informal tone? Is there documentation required? If a specific number of sources are required, how many must be books vs. online sources? What type of citation is called for: APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.? Is there a page or word count minimum/maximum? Are you required to submit a draft before the final copy? Will there be peer review?

- **Get answers to your questions.** After thoroughly reading the assignment sheet, you might not have questions right away. However, after reading it again, either before or after you try to start the assignment, you might find that you have questions. Don't play a guessing game when it comes to tackling assignment criteria—ask the right person for help: the instructor. Discuss any and all questions with the person who assigned the work, either in person or via email. Visit him or her during office hours or stay after class. Do not wait until the last minute, as doing so puts your grade at risk. Don't be shy about asking your professors questions. Not only will you better your understanding and the outcome of your paper, but professors tend to enjoy and benefit from student inquiry, as questions help them rethink their assignments and improve the clarity of their expectations. You likely are not the only student with a question, so be the one who is assertive and responsible enough to get answers. In the worst-case scenario, when you have done all of these things and a professor still fails to provide you with the clarity you are looking for, discuss your questions with fellow classmates.
- **Visit the Writing Center.** Many colleges and universities have a writing center. Tutors are helpful consultants for reviewing writing assignments both before and after you begin. If you feel somewhat confident about what you need to include in your writing assignment, bring your completed outline and/or the first draft of your paper together with your assignment sheet. Tutors can also review your final draft before its submission to your professor. Many writing centers allow you to make appointments online for convenience and may also have “walk-in” availability. It is a good idea to check out the available options a week or so in advance of when you will actually need the appointment, or even longer if it will be during mid-term or finals week.
- **Create a timeline.** Set due dates for yourself, whether they be to have a topic picked or a whole rough draft completed. Procrastination rarely results in a good paper. Some school libraries offer helpful computer programs that can create an effective assignment timeline for you. This is a helpful option for new, inexperienced writers who have not yet learned the art of analyzing assignments, and who are not familiar with the amount of time that is required for the college writing process. Remember, late papers may or may not be accepted by your instructor, and even if they are, your grade will likely be reduced. Don't sell yourself short with late submissions.

Instructors will come up with any number of assignments, most of which will stress different types of composition. The techniques you use in writing a narrative can also translate into writing a short story or observational essay. The basic rhetorical strategies are covered in their own chapters, but here are samples of reading and analysis assignments that may be blended into your course.

Rhetorical Analysis

A rhetorical analysis calls for students to closely read a text and determine several characteristics about it (author, context, purpose, emotional appeal/effects, etc). For example, you may read “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift and write a rhetorical analysis. Remember, this is not a reflection piece, but rather a deep look at the tone, style, and intended audience, as well as ethos, logos, and pathos.

At first, a rhetorical analysis sounds somewhat difficult. However, analyzing just means making a conscious effort to read each word carefully and think about what the author is doing. The first step would be to read the piece, not once, but two or three times. Highlight important passages and take notes. For this assignment, the instructor wanted students to write about ethos, logos, and pathos, which are rhetorical terms you should become familiar with. Pay attention to specific word choices that may evoke emotion, or any facts the author may have put forward in the text. Look at the background of the author as well as the time period in which he or she was writing. Consider the tone of the piece. Is it formal/informal/serious/humorous? These are all things to keep in mind while reading. Make an ongoing list of the author's rhetorical techniques that you may want to discuss in your paper. (See Chapter 15: Argument for more detailed information on ethos, logos, pathos.)

Remember to be mindful of your essay's organization. It is easy to discuss three different topics in one paragraph and jump back and forth from one idea to the next, but this makes it difficult for your reader to follow. Also, do not forget that this is not a reflection. For this assignment, the instructor isn't concerned with your reaction to the text, or your ability to summarize; he or she wants to gauge your analytical skills.

Summary/Response Paper

An example of the summary/response writing would be to read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and give a brief summary of the article and a response. Students might be asked to cite specific examples and avoid generalizations.

Before writing a summary, it is important to use your critical reading skills. First, read the article carefully. It might help to write down the main point of each paragraph in the margin next to it. Next, reread the article and look carefully for the main points the author is trying to get across. Look for things the author states explicitly, as well as what is implied by things that are not clearly stated. Look for any biases or missing information. Ask yourself questions while you read, such as "What is the big picture here? What is the author really trying to get across with this or that example?" The title will often provide a clue about the author's main point. Most of all, slow down and take the time to reread the article several times. In summarizing an article, think about how you would explain its message to someone who hasn't read it. What are the main points of the piece? What is necessary to know about the work in order to understand it?

While writing a summary is a familiar assignment from grade school, in college, summaries are no longer enough, and instructors will frequently require a response. Writing a response is giving your opinion about the text. However, statements such as "I did/did not like it" are not sufficient. Not only must you be more descriptive with your opinions, but you need to support them. If you do not think that an author provides enough information to prove his or her point, state the specific flaws and what can be done to improve them. The same rule applies for any emotions felt while reading the text. Instead of just saying the writing made you sad, point out a specific passage in the text that made you feel that way. Talk about the word choices the author used and how that affected your reading.

It is important to note the word "brief" in the assignment sheet. The instructor does not want a two-page summary and then a paragraph of reflection. Your response should take up the bulk of the paper.

Finishing the Assignment

Remember, no matter what the assignment, identifying key words in guidelines can help you determine what type of thinking and ability the professor wants you to demonstrate. The following six areas of competencies are from Bloom's Taxonomy.

- **Knowledge:** This becomes evident in how well you remember the subject matter, such as the major ideas, dates, places, and events. Questions may begin with *identify, describe, examine, when, where, who*.
- **Comprehension:** How well do you understand the information presented. Can you describe the information in your own words? Questions may begin with *interpret, contrast, predict, discuss*.
- **Application:** Can you use the principles learned to solve other problems in different situations? Questions may begin with *illustrate, examine, modify, experiment, relate*.
- **Analysis:** Can you recognize hidden meanings, see patterns, identify the underlying parts? Questions may begin with *separate, order, connect, classify, divide, explain*.
- **Synthesis:** Can you relate knowledge from different areas to draw conclusions? Questions may begin with *modify, rearrange, substitute, design, invent, generalize*.
- **Evaluation:** This involves verifying the value of the evidence when solving controversies, and developing opinions. Questions may begin with *decide, convince, select, compare, summarize*.

If you need clarification on what your instructor is looking for, do not hesitate to ask. After you have finished your paper, be sure to double-check that you have fulfilled all the requirements. Proofread your paper multiple times before handing in the final copy.