So You've Got a Writing Assignment. Now What?

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It's the first day of the semester and you've just stepped foot into your Intro to American Politics class.* You grab a seat toward the back as the instructor enters, distributes the syllabus, and starts to discuss the course schedule. Just before class ends, she grabs a thin stack of papers from her desk and, distributing them, announces, "This is your first writing assignment for the term. It's due two weeks from Thursday, so I suggest you begin early." Your stomach clenches. For some people, a writing assignment causes a little nervous energy, but for you, it's a deep, vomit-inducing fireball that shoots down your body and out your toes. As soon as the assignment sheet hits your hands, your eyes dart wildly about, frantically trying to decipher what you're supposed to do. How many pages is this thing supposed to be? What am I supposed to write about? What's Chicago style? When is it due? You know your instructor is talking about the assignment right now, but her voice fades into a murmur as you busy yourself with the assignment sheet. The sound of shuffling feet interrupts your thoughts; you look up and realize she's dismissed the class. You shove the assignment into your bag, convinced you're doomed before you've even started.

So you've got a writing assignment. Now what? First, don't panic. Writing assignments make many of us nervous, but this anxiety is especially prevalent in first year students. When that first writing assignment comes along, fear, anxiety, avoidance, and even anger are typical responses. However, negative emotional reactions like these can cloud your ability to be rational, and interpreting a writing assignment is a rational activity and a skill. You can learn and cultivate this skill with practice. Why is learning how to do it so important?

First, you can learn how to manage negative emotional responses to writing. Research indicates emotional responses can affect academic performance "over and above the influence of cognitive ability or motivation" (Pekrun 129). So, even when you have the knowledge or desire to accomplish a particular goal, your fear, anxiety, or boredom can have greater control over how you perform. Anything you can do to minimize these reactions (and potentially boost performance) benefits your personal and intellectual wellness.

Learning to interpret writing assignment expectations also helps encourage productive dialogue between you and your fellow classmates and between you and your instructor. You'll be able to discuss the assignment critically with your peers, ask them specific questions about information you don't know, or compare approaches to essays. You'll also be able to answer your classmates' questions confidently. Many students are too afraid or intimidated to ask their instructors for help, but when you understand an instructor's expectations for an assignment, you also understand the skills being assessed. With this method, when you do not understand a requirement or expectation, you'll have more confidence to approach your instructor directly, using him as valuable resource that can encourage you, clarify confusion, or strengthen your understanding of course concepts.

What follows is a series of practical guidelines useful for interpreting most college writing assignments. In my experience, many students already know and employ many of these strategies regularly; however, few students know or use all of them every time. Along the way, I'll apply some of these guidelines to actual assignments used in university classrooms. You'll also be able to get into the heads of other students as they formulate their own approaches to some of these assignments.[1]

Guidelines for Interpreting Writing Assignments

1. Don't Panic and Don't Procrastinate

Writing assignments should not incite panic, but it happens. We've already discussed how panicking and other negative reactions work against you by clouding your ability to analyze a situation rationally. So when your instructor gives you that writing assignment, don't try to read the whole assignment sheet at breakneck speed. Instead, take a deep breath and focus. If your instructor talks about the assignment, stop what you're doing and listen. Often, teachers will read through the assignment aloud and may even elaborate on some of the requirements. Write down any extra information or advice your instructor provides about the requirements, his or her expectations, changes, possible approaches, or topic ideas. This information will be useful to you as you begin thinking about the topic and formulating your approach. Also, pay attention to your classmates' questions. You might not need those answers now, but you may find them helpful later.

If you're an undergraduate student taking more than one class, it's not uncommon to have several writing assignments due within days of each other. Hence, you should avoid procrastinating. People procrastinate for different reasons. Maybe you wait because you've always been able to put together a decent paper the night before it's due. Perhaps you wait because avoiding the assignment until the last minute is your response to academic stress. Waiting until the last minute to complete a writing assignment in college is a gamble. You put yourself at risk for the unexpected: your printer runs out of ink, your laptop crashes and you didn't backup your work, the Internet in the library is down, the books you need are checked out, you can't locate any recent research on your topic, you have a last-minute emergency, or you have a question about the assignment you can't find the answer to. The common result of situations like these is that if the student is able to complete the assignment, it is often a poor representatatoin of her actual knowledge or abilities. Start your assignment as soon as possible and leave yourself plenty of time to plan for the unexpected.

2. Read the Assignment. Read It Again. Refer to It Often

The ability to read critically is a useful skill. When you read a textbook chapter for your history course, for example, you might skim it

for major ideas first, re-read and then highlight or underline important items, make notes in the margins, look up unfamiliar terms, or compile a list of questions. These same strategies can be applied when reading writing assignments.

The assignment sheet is full of material to be deciphered, so attack it the same way you would attack your history book. When Bailey[2], an undergraduate at a university in Los Angeles, was asked to respond to a biology writing assignment, here's what she had to say about where she would start:

> When getting a writing assignment, you should read it more than once just to get a knowledge of what they're [the instructors] really asking for and underline important information, which is what I'm doing now. Before starting the assignment, always write some notes down to help you get started.

Here are some other strategies to help you become an active, critical reader of writing assignments:

1. Start by skimming, noting anything in particular that jumps out at you.
2. As soon as you have the time and the ability to focus, re-read the assignment carefully. Underline or highlight important features of the assignment or criteria you think you might forget about after you've started writing.
3. Don't be afraid to write on the assignment sheet. Use the available white space to list questions, define key terms or concepts, or jot down any initial ideas you have. Don't let the margins confine your writing (or your thoughts). If you're running out of space, grab a fresh sheet of paper and keep writing. The sooner you starting thinking and writing about the assignment, the easier it may be to complete.

As you begin drafting, you should occasionally refer back to the official assignment sheet. Maintaining constant contact with your teacher's instructions will help keep you on the right track, may remind you of criteria you've forgotten, and it might even spark new ideas if you're stuck.

3. Know Your Purpose and Your Audience

Instructors give writing assignments so students can demonstrate their knowledge and/or their ability to apply knowledge. On the surface, it may seem like the instructor is simply asking you to answer some questions to demonstrate that you understand the material or to compare and contrast concepts, theorists, or approaches. However, assessing knowledge is usually just one reason for the assignment. More often than not, your instructor is also evaluating your ability to demonstrate other critical skills. For example, she might be trying to determine if you can apply a concept to a particular situation, if you know how to summarize complex material, or if you can think critically about an idea and then creatively apply that thinking to new situations. Maybe she's looking at how you manage large quantities of research or how you position expert opinions against one another. Or perhaps she wants to know if you can form and support a sound, credible argument rather than describing your opinion about a certain issue.

Instructors have different ways of conveying what they expect from their students in a writing assignment. Some detail explicitly what they intend to evaluate and may even provide a score sheet. Others may provide general (even vague) instructions and leave the rest up to you. So, what can you do to ensure you're on the right track? Keep reading through these guidelines, and you'll learn some ways to read between the lines. Once you identify all the intentions at work (that is, what your instructor is trying to measure), you'll be able to consider and address them.

Audience is a critical component to any writing assignment, and realistically, one or several different audiences may be involved when you're writing a paper in college. The person evaluating your essay is typically the audience most college students consider first. However, your instructor may identify a separate audience to whom you should tailor your response. Do not ignore this audience! If your business instructor tells you to write a research proposal that will be delivered to members of the local chamber of commerce, then adapt your response to them. If you're in an engineering course, and your instructor asks you to write a product design report about a piece of medical equipment geared toward medical practitioners (and not engineers), you should think differently about your terminology, use of background information, and what motivates this particular audience when they

read your report. Analyzing the background (personal, educational, professional), existing knowledge, needs, and concerns of your audience will help you make more informed decisions about word choice, structure, tone, or other components of your paper.

4. Locate and Understand the Directive Verbs

One thing you should do when interpreting a writing assignment is to locate the directive verbs and know what the instructor means by them. Directive verbs tell you what you should do in order to formulate a written response. The following table lists common directive verbs used in writing assignments:

Table 1. Frequently used directive verbs.

analyze	defend	illustrate
apply	describe	investigate
argue	design	narrate
compare	discuss	show
consider	explain	summarize
contrast	explore	synthesize
create	evaluate	trace

You might notice that many of the directive verbs have similar general meanings. For example, although explore and investigate are not necessarily synonyms for one another, when used in writing assignments, they may be asking for a similar structural response. Understanding what those verbs mean to you and to your instructor may be the most difficult part of understanding a writing assignment. Take a look at this sample writing assignment from a philosophy course:

Philosophy Writing Assignment *

> "History is what the historian says it is." Discuss.
>
> All papers are to be typed, spell-checked and grammar-checked. Responses should be 2000 words. They should be well written, with a logical flow of

> thought, and double-spaced with 1" margins on all sides. Papers should be typed in 12-pitch font, using Courier or Times Roman typeface. Indent the first line of each new paragraph five spaces. Also include a title page so that the instructor can identify the student, assignment and course number.
>
> Proper standard English is required. Do not use slang or a conversational style of writing. Always avoid contractions (e.g. "can't" for "cannot") in formal essays. Always write in complete sentences and paragraphs! Staple all papers in the upper left-hand corner and do not put them in a folder, binder or plastic cover.
>
> All written work, citations and bibliographies should conform to the rules of composition laid down in The Chicago Manual of Style (15th edition), or Charles Lipson's Doing Honest Work in College (chapter 5). A paper that lacks correct citations and/or a bibliography will receive an automatic 10% reduction in grade.

* Sample undergraduate philosophy writing assignment, courtesy of Dr. Kenneth Locke, Religious Studies Department, University of the West.

You may interpret the word discuss in one way, while your instructor may have a different understanding. The key is to make certain that these two interpretations are as similar as possible. You can develop a mutual understanding of the assignment's directive verbs and calculate an effective response using the following steps:

1. Look up the verb in a dictionary and write down all of the definitions.
2. List all possible synonyms or related terms and look those up as well; then, see if any of these terms suggest a clearer interpretation of what the assignment is asking you to do.
3. Write down several methods you could use to approach the assignment. (Check out guideline eight in this essay for some common approaches.)

4. Consult with your instructor, but do not be discouraged if he/she is unwilling to clarify or provide additional information; your interpretation of the directions and subsequent approach to fulfilling the assignment criteria may be one of its purposes.
5. Consult a trusted peer or writing center tutor for assistance.
6. Figure out what you know.

When deciphering an assignment's purpose is particularly challenging, make a list. Think about what you know, what you think you know, and what you do not know about what the assignment is asking you to do. Putting this list into a table makes the information easier to handle. For example, if you were given an assignment that asked you to analyze presentations in your business ethics class, like the assignment in Figure 2, your table might look like Table 2 below:

Business Writing Assignment Presentation Analysis

During three weeks of class, you'll observe several small group presentations on business ethics given by your fellow classmates. Choose two of the presentations and write a short paper analyzing them. For each presentation, be sure to do the following:

1. In one paragraph, concisely summarize the group's main conclusions
2. Analyze the presentation by answering any two of the following three:
    a. With which of the group's conclusions do you agree? Why? With which of the conclusions do you disagree? Why? (include specific examples of both)
    b. What particular issue of ethics did the group not address or only address slightly? Analyze this aspect from your perspective.
    c. In what way could you apply one or more of the group's conclusions to a particular situation? (The situation could be hypothetical, one from your personal or professional experience, or a real-world example).

The paper should be no more than 3 pages in length with 12-pt font, 1 ½ line spacing. It is due one week after the conclusion of presentations.

Your grade will depend upon

1. the critical thought and analytical skills displayed in the paper;
2. your use of ethical principles from chapter 7 of our textbook;
3. the professionalism, correctness, and logic of your writing.

Table 2. Sample knowledge table for undergraduate business writing assignment.

What I Know	**What I Think I Know**	**What I Don't Know**
Need to observe and take notes on 2 presentations	Concisely means "short," so my summaries should be shorter than the other parts of the paper.	What does the professor mean by "critical thought"?
Need to summarize each groups' conclusions	I think I need to apply my own understanding of ethics to figure out which issue the group didn't address	How does the professor evaluate "professionalism"? How do I demonstrate this?
2–3 pages long; 12 pt font and 1 ½ spacing	I think I understand everything from chapter 7	Do I need to apply both groups' conclusions to the same situation or to two different ones?
Need to include personal opinion	I think it's okay to say "I" in the paper.	How much personal opinion should I include and do I need specific examples to support my opinion?
Need to answer 2 of the 3 questions under part 2	I don't think I need an introduction.	Should I separate my essay into two parts, one for each group I observed?

After reviewing the table, you can see that this student has a lot of thoughts about this assignment. He understands some of the general features. However, there are some critical elements that need clarification before he submits the assignment. For instance, he's unsure about the best structure for the paper and the way it should sound. Dividing your understanding of an assignment into a table or list can help you identify the confusing parts. Then, you can formulate specific ques-

tions that your instructor or a writing center consultant can help you answer.

6. Ask Yourself: Do I Need an Argument?

Perhaps one of the most important things to know is whether or not your instructor is asking you to formulate and support an argument. Sometimes this is easy to determine. For example, an assignment many instructors include in their courses is a persuasive paper where you're typically asked to choose an issue, take a position, and then support it using evidence. For many students, a persuasive paper is a well known assignment, but when less familiar assignment genres come up, some students may be confused about argument expectations. This confusion may arise because the instructor uses a directive verb that is easily misinterpreted. What about the verb explain? Does it make you think of words like summarize, review, or describe (which would suggest more facts and less opinion)? Or, do you associate it with words like debate, investigate, or defend (which imply the need for a well-supported argument)? You can also look for other clues in the assignment indicating a need for evidence. If your instructor mentions scholarly citations, you'll probably need it. If you need evidence, you'll probably need an argument. Still confused? Talk to your instructor.

7. Consider the Evidence

If your assignment mentions a minimum number of required sources, references a particular citation style, or suggests scholarly journals to review during your research, then these are telltale signs that you'll need to find and use evidence. What qualifies as evidence? Let's review some of the major types:

- Personal experience
- Narrative examples (historical or hypothetical)
- Statistics (or numerical forms of data) and facts
- Graphs, charts, or other visual representatives of data
- Expert opinion
- Research results (experimental or descriptive)

Each of these offers benefits and drawbacks when used to support an argument. Consider this writing assignment from a 200-level biology class on genetics:

Biology Writing Assignment

Genes & Gene Research

Purpose:

This writing assignment will ask you to familiarize yourself with genes, the techniques gene researchers use when working with genes, and the current research programs investigating genes. The report is worth 10% of your final grade in the course.

In a research report of at least 1500 words, you should address the following:

1. Generally, what is a gene and what does it do? Create a universally applicable definition for a gene.
2. Choose a specific gene and apply your definition to it (i.e., what does this particular gene do and how does it work?)
3. Recreate the history of the gene you've chosen including the gene's discovery (and discoverer), the motivation behind the research into this gene, outcomes of the research, and any medical, social, historical, or biological implications to its discovery.
4. Explore the current research available on your gene. Who is conducting the research, what are the goals (big/small; long-term/short-term) of the research, and how is the research being funded?

Research should be properly documented using CSE (Council of Science Editors) style.

The report should be typewritten, double spaced, in a font of reasonable size.

This instructor asks students to demonstrate several skills, including definition, summary, research, and application. Nearly all of these components should include some evidence, specifically scientific research studies on the particular gene the student has chosen. After reading it, here's what Bailey said about how she would start the assignment: "This assignment basically has to do with who you are, so it should be something simple to answer, not too difficult since you

should know yourself." Ernest, another student, explains how he would approach the same assignment: "So, first of all, to do this assignment, I would go on the computer, like on the Internet, and I would . . . do research about genes first. And . . . everything about them, and then I would . . . start with the first question, second question, third and fourth, and that's it." For Bailey, using her own life as an example to illustrate genetic inheritance would be the best way to start responding to the assignment. Ernest, on the other hand, thinks a bit differently; he knows he needs "research about genes" to get started, and, like many students, figures the internet will tell him everything he needs to know. So, how do you know what evidence works best? Know the field you're writing in: what type(s) of evidence it values, why it's valuable, and what sources provide that evidence. Some other important questions you should ask yourself include

- Where, in the paper, is the most effective place for this evidence?
- What type of evidence would support my argument effectively?
- What kind of evidence would most convince my audience?
- What's the best way to integrate this evidence into my ideas?
- What reference/citation style does this discipline use?

If your writing assignment calls for evidence, it is important that you answer these questions. Failure to do so could cost you major points—in your assignment and with your instructor.

8. Calculate the Best Approach

When you decide how to approach your paper, you're also outlining its basic structure. Structure is the way you construct your ideas and move from one idea to the next. Typical structural approaches include question/answer, comparison/contrast, problem/solution, methodology, cause/effect, narration/reflection, description/illustration, classification/division, thesis/support, analysis/synthesis, and theory/application. These patterns can be used individually or in combination with each other to illustrate more complex relationships among ideas. Learning what structures are useful in particular writing situations starts with reviewing the assignment. Sometimes, the instructor clearly details how you should structure your essay. On the other hand,

the assignment may suggest a particular structural pattern but may not actually reflect what the instructor expects to see. For example, if the prompt asks four questions, does that mean you're supposed to write a paragraph for each answer and then slap on an introduction and a conclusion? Not necessarily. Consider what structure would deliver your message accurately and effectively.

Knowing what structures are acceptable within the discipline is also important. Many students are uncomfortable with rigidity; they wonder why their chemistry lab reports must be presented "just so." Think about the last time you looked at a restaurant menu. If you're looking for appetizers, those items are usually listed at the front of the menu whereas desserts are closer to the back. If a restaurant menu listed the desserts up front, you might find the design unfamiliar and the menu difficult to navigate. The same can be said for formalized writing structures including lab reports or literature reviews, for example. Examining scholarly publications (journal articles or books) within that field will help you identify commonly used structural patterns and understand why those structures are acceptable within the discipline.

9. Understand and Adhere to Formatting and Style Guidelines

Writing assignments usually provide guidelines regarding format and/or style. Requirements like word count or page length, font type or size, margins, line spacing, and citation styles fall into this category. Most instructors have clear expectations for how an assignment should look based on official academic styles, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA), the American Psychological Association (APA), the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), or the Council of Science Editors (CSE). If your instructor specifically references a style then locate a copy of the manual, so you'll know how to cite source material and how to develop your document's format (font, spacing, margin size, etc.) and style (use of headings, abbreviations, capitalization).

Occasionally, an instructor may modify a standard style to meet her personal preferences. Follow any additional formatting or style guidelines your instructor provides. If you don't, you could lose points unnecessarily. They may also refer you to scholarly journals to use as models. Don't ignore these! Not only will you be able to review professional examples of the kinds of work you're doing (like lab reports, lit

reviews, research reports, executive summaries, etc.), you'll also learn more about what style of writing a discipline values.

10. Identify Your Available Resources and Ask Questions

Even after following these steps, you may still have questions. When that happens, you should know who your resources are and what they do (and don't do). After Nicole read the business ethics assignment (provided earlier in this chapter), she said, "I would send a draft to [the instructor] and ask him if he could see if I'm on the right track." Nicole's instincts are right on target; your primary resource is your instructor. Professors may appear intimidating, but they are there to help. They can answer questions and may even offer research recommendations. If you ask ahead of time, many are also willing to review a draft of your project and provide feedback. However, don't expect your teacher to proofread your paper or give you the "right" answer. Writing assignments are one method by which instructors examine your decision making, problem solving, or critical thinking skills.

The library is another key resource. Reference librarians can help you develop an effective research process by teaching you how to use the catalog for books or general references, how to search the databases, and how to use library equipment (copy machines, microfiche, scanners, etc.). They will not choose your topic or conduct your research for you. Spending some time learning from a reference librarian is worthwhile; it will make you a more efficient and more effective student researcher, saving you time and frustration.

Many institutions have student support centers for writing and are especially useful for first year students. The staff is an excellent source of knowledge about academic expectations in college, about research and style, and about writing assignment interpretation. If you're having trouble understanding your assignment, go to the writing center for help. If you're working on a draft and you want to review it with someone, they can take a look. Your writing center tutor will not write your paper for you, nor will he serve as an editor to correct grammar mistakes. When you visit your university's writing center, you'll be able to discuss your project with an experienced tutor who can offer practical advice in a comfortable learning environment.

The above are excellent resources for student assistance. Your instructor, the librarians, and the writing center staff will not do the

work for you. Instead, they'll teach you how to help yourself. The guidelines I've outlined here are meant to do exactly the same. So the next time you've got a writing assignment, what will you do?

Discussion

1. Think about a previous writing assignment that was a challenge for you. What strategies did you use at the time? After reading the chapter, what other strategies do you think might have been useful?
2. Choose two verbs from the list of frequently used directive verbs (Table 1). Look up these verbs (and possible synonyms) in the dictionary and write down their definitions. If you saw these verbs in a writing assignment, what potential questions might you ask your professor in order to clarify what he/she means?
3. Choose two of the sample assignments from the chapter and create a chart similar to Table 2 for each assignment. What differences do you notice? If these were your assignments, what evidence do you think would best support your argument and why (review guideline seven for help)?
4. What advice would you give to first year college students about writing, writing assignments, or instructor expectations? Structure this advice in the form of a guideline similar to those included in the chapter.

Notes

1. My thanks to Dr. Kenneth Locke from University of the West for contributing a sample assignment to this project and to the students who participated in this exercise; their interest, time, and enthusiasm helps bring a sense of realism to this essay, and I am indebted to them for their assistance.

2. The names of student participants in this document have been changed to retain confidentiality.

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