Understanding Writing Prompts
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For many college papers, a prompt will ask questions related to readings and class discussion, asking you to demonstrate analysis and discussion of the topic. Decoding what a prompt is asking can sometimes be overwhelming. The sooner you understand a prompt, the sooner you can start writing. Here are some useful tips to understand writing prompts:

- **As soon as you receive the prompt, read through it twice**: Though many prompts are complex to encourage well-reasoned responses, they can be confusing/inaccessible if read only once before drafting. Reading the prompt as soon as possible may help you identify how long a paper should be, how much information you should gather, and can reveal concepts you need to understand before approaching the assignment.

- **Once you have read the prompt, try to share out what you think the prompt means to a friend, family member, or another student**: This helps to “check” if your understanding of the prompt matches that of other people outside of the class and may help to identify what you still need to know.

- **Key words can identify the type of assignment that the prompt is calling for**: Most prompts signal if the paper is expected to be a compare-and-contrast paper, rhetorical analysis, synthesis paper, etc. Keywords may include terms such as *compare, synthesize, develop, explore*, etc.

- **Come back to the prompt and highlight key characteristics, terms, and phrases relevant to the topic/assignment and compare it to course notes/assignments**: When reviewing the prompt, highlight terms or phrases that have come up frequently in discussion or are significant in the course. You may also choose to highlight terms in the prompt that you need to study more. Sometimes a prompt asks you to recall resources or texts from an earlier point in the course, so a review of key sources, topics, course notes, or related assignments can help you to write an effective paper. Additionally, this reveals key scenes or text sections identified within the prompt.

- **Look for language in the prompt that indicates who the target audience is**: Even though your audience will often include your professor and peers, some prompts for research papers and essays will ask you to address other target audiences. For example, a paper that discusses a new method of patient support may cite a hospital board of directors as a potential audience. By identifying your target audience, you can establish context necessary for your audience to engage with your paper.

- **Prepare questions for discussion to ask your TA or professor regarding parts of the prompt that are unclear**: Once you have gone through the prompt itself, make a list of questions to discuss with your professor or TA so you can get more clarity on the assignment.