UNDERSTANDING YOUR ASSIGNMENT

If your assignment is confusing and you're not sure how to get started, the information below may be useful to you. It helps you understand what the instructor expects and guides you through some of the issues you should consider before you begin to write.

1 KEY WORDS

Identify the key words in the prompt. Circle any question words (e.g., who, what, how, why). Underline or highlight command words, or verbs. The following list includes many of the most common command words used in writing prompts.

**Account for**
Explain causes or reasons for a phenomenon.

**Analyze**
Break a subject down into its component parts, describe or evaluate each, and often describe the relationship among the parts.

**Assess**
Offer an opinion of something, generally measuring it against some standard (which must be made explicit).

**Compare/Contrast**
Show how two or more things are similar or different.

**Define**
Give the meaning of a term. May involve identifying the class or category to which it belongs and explaining how it differs from others in the same category. May require presentation of multiple views.

**Describe**
Offer a detailed account of the characteristics of something.

**Discuss**
Explain the various aspects of a topic or problem, come to a conclusion about it, and support that conclusion.

**Evaluate**
Estimate the value or effectiveness of something; often requires assertion and defense of an informed opinion.

**Prove**
Show the truth of a statement using logic or experimentation.

**Relate**
Show the nature of a connection between two or more things; explain the nature of their interactions or effects on one another.

**Research**
Gather information from legitimate, qualified outside sources. Usually implies that information should be analyzed.

**Review**
Discuss a topic critically, usually offering an evaluation supported by argument.

**Summarize**
Provide a concise account of a topic, process, or argument, omitting unnecessary detail.

**Support**
Provide reasons, logical argument, examples, etc. to demonstrate the truth or validity of a claim.

**Trace**
Show how something has changed or developed, usually chronologically.

**Explain**
Account for character, causes, results, implications, etc. by providing relevant details.

**Generate**
Offer a series of ideas, suggestions, solutions, etc. (often new and original) on a topic.

**Interpret**
Make something explicit, or clarify, often in a specific context or with reference to a specific body of knowledge.

**Illustrate**
Explain or clarify something with the use of examples and/or figures.

**Outline**
Provide main features or big picture, excluding minor details.
II  IMPLIED QUESTIONS

Sometimes the task is not explicitly stated. In such cases, it is important to look for relationships among key words in the prompt.

Example 1:
Plato and Aristotle have differing views on ethics. Discuss. Here, the word differing suggests the need to compare or contrast.

Example 2:
Some bloggers claim that the American political system is “broken.” What do they mean by this, and does their claim have validity? The words what do they mean indicate that interpretation is required. The word validity implies that the student is meant to evaluate the claims.

Example 3:
The effectiveness of treatment is determined, in part, by patient cooperation with medical personnel. Discuss this phenomenon in the context of in-patient mental health facilities.

The word determined implies some discussion of cause and effect.

III  AUDIENCE

Ask yourself:

- Who is my audience?
- What do they already know or understand about the topic?
- What do I need to explain?

If you’re not sure whom you should address, check with your instructor.

IV  STYLE/TONE

Consider whether you should:

- Write formally or informally
- Use the first person (I, we, me, us, my, our)
- Use humor

Avoid using big words just to sound more knowledgeable. Not only can this approach make your writing sound stiff and stuffy, it can also sound ridiculous if you use big words incorrectly.

V  EVIDENCE

- Consider what kinds of support or evidence are needed:
  - Authority is the opinion of recognized experts.
  - Cases rely on individual experience, hypothetical situations, or anecdotes from outside sources.
  - Objective facts must be gathered through research; they may include statistical information, field observations, or experimental results.
  - Examples point to relevant portions or aspects of actual texts, art work, artifacts, or other objects that you may be studying.
- Determine what you must do to gather this evidence (e.g., read, research, interview, observe, etc.).

VI  LENGTH AND FORMAT

Don’t ignore these aspects of a prompt. They can provide clues to the instructor’s expectations. Length requirements, for example, reveal something about the level of detail expected. Instructions to write a lab report imply that you should use a tone and level of formality typical of published reports on laboratory experiments.

Much of the information on this handout is adapted from material prepared by the writing centers at Massey University (http://owll.massey.ac.nz/academic-writing/command-words.php, accessed 8/24/2011) and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/readassign.html, accessed 8/24/2011).