

Getting Started

1. Read the assignment carefully, *as soon as you get it*.
2. Ask your instructor about *anything* you don't understand.
3. Make a *concrete plan* for how you plan to complete the assignment.

Assignment Formats

The assignment's parts may not appear in exactly this order, and each part may be very long *or* very short. Nonetheless, being aware of this standard pattern can help you understand what your instructor wants you to do.

The Overview: The instructor might set the stage with some general discussion of the subject of the assignment, introduce the topic, or remind you of something pertinent that you have discussed in class.

The Task: Pay attention; this part tells you what to do when you write the paper. Look for the key verb or verbs in the sentence. Words like *analyze*, *summarize*, or *compare* direct you to think about your topic in a certain way. Also pay attention to words such as *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*; these words specify tasks.

The Thought Process: Here you will find some questions to use as springboards as you begin to think about the topic. Instructors usually include these questions as *suggestions* rather than *requirements*. Do not feel compelled to answer every question unless the instructor asks you to do so. Pay attention to the order of the questions. Sometimes they suggest the thinking process your instructor imagines you will need to follow to begin thinking about the topic.

Style Tips: These are the instructor's comments about writing expectations such as "be concise" or "argue furiously."

Technical Details: These instructions usually indicate format rules or guidelines such as "12-point font" or "double-spaced."

Try to look at the question from the point of view of the instructor. Recognize that your instructor has a reason for giving you this assignment and for giving it to you at a particular point in the semester. In every assignment, the instructor has a challenge for you. This challenge could be anything from demonstrating an ability to think clearly to demonstrating an ability to use the library. See the assignment not as a vague suggestion of what to do but as an opportunity to show that you can handle the course material as directed. **Assignments give you more than a topic to discuss—they ask you to do something with the topic.**

Interpreting the Assignment

1. Why did your instructor ask you to do this particular task?

Your instructor wants you to think about something in a particular way for a particular reason. Is it to gather research from a variety of outside sources and present a coherent picture? Is it to take material I have been learning in class and apply it to a new situation? Is it to prove a point one way or another? Key words from the assignment can help you figure this out. Look for key terms in the form of *active verbs* that tell you what to do.

Information Words: define, explain, illustrate, summarize, trace, research

Relation Words: compare, contrast, apply, cause, effect, relate

Interpretation Words: assess, prove, justify, evaluate, respond, support, synthesize, analyze, argue

2. Who is your audience?

Imagine someone smart enough to understand a clear, logical argument, but not someone who already knows exactly what is going on in your particular paper. Remember, even if the instructor knows everything there is to know about your paper topic, he or she still has to read *your* paper and assess *your* understanding. In other words, *teach* the material to your reader.

3. What kind of evidence do you need to support your ideas?

There are many kinds of evidence, and what type of evidence will work for your assignment can depend on several factors—the discipline, the parameters of the assignment, and your instructor’s preference. You are not just learning how to argue; you are learning how to argue with specific types of materials and ideas. Ask your instructor what counts as acceptable evidence.

4. What kind of writing style is acceptable?

No matter what field you are writing for or what facts you are including, if you do not write so that your reader can understand your main idea, you have wasted your time. So make *clarity* your main goal.

5. What are the absolute rules of the assignment?

The technical information you are given in an assignment always seems like the easy part. This section can also actually give you lots of little hints about approaching the task. For example, the page length tells you something important: The instructor thinks the size of the paper is appropriate to the assignment’s parameters. In plain English, your instructor is telling you how many pages it *should* take for you to answer the question as fully as you are expected to.