

4.3: Writing Assignments

Learning Objectives

- Describe common types and expectations of writing tasks given in a college class



Figure 1. All college classes require some form of writing. Investing some time in refining your writing skills so that you are a more confident, skilled, and efficient writer will pay dividends in the long run.

What to Do With Writing Assignments

Writing assignments can be as varied as the instructors who assign them. Some assignments are explicit about what exactly you'll need to do, in what order, and how it will be graded. Others are more open-ended, leaving you to determine the best path toward completing the project. Most fall somewhere in the middle, containing details about some aspects but leaving other assumptions unstated. It's important to remember that your first resource for getting clarification about an assignment is your instructor—she or he will be very willing to talk out ideas with you, to be sure you're prepared at each step to do well with the writing.

Writing in college is usually a response to class materials—an assigned reading, a discussion in class, an experiment in a lab. Generally speaking, these writing tasks can be divided into three broad categories: summary assignments, defined-topic assignments, and undefined-topic assignments.

Link to Learning

[This Assignment Calculator](#) can help you plan ahead for your writing assignment. Just plug in the date you plan to get started and the date it is due, and it will help break it down into manageable chunks.

Summary Assignments

Being asked to summarize a source is a common task in many types of writing. It can also seem like a straightforward task: simply restate, in shorter form, what the source says. A lot of advanced skills are hidden in this seemingly simple assignment, however.

An effective summary does the following:

- reflects your accurate understanding of a source's thesis or purpose
- differentiates between major and minor ideas in a source
- demonstrates your ability to identify key phrases to quote
- demonstrates your ability to effectively paraphrase most of the source's ideas
- captures the tone, style, and distinguishing features of a source
- does not reflect your personal opinion about the source

That last point is often the most challenging: we are opinionated creatures, by nature, and it can be very difficult to keep our opinions from creeping into a summary, which is meant to be completely neutral.

In college-level writing, assignments that are *only* summary are rare. That said, many types of writing tasks contain at least some element of summary, from a biology report that explains what happened during a chemical process, to an analysis essay that requires you to explain what several prominent positions about gun control are, as a component of comparing them against one another.

? ? Writing Effective Summaries

Start with a Clear Identification of the Work

This automatically lets your readers know your intentions and that you're covering the work of another author.

- Clearly identify (in the present tense) the background information needed for your summary: the type of work, title, author, and main point. Example:
 - *In the featured article “Five Kinds of Learning,” the author, Holland Oates, justifies his opinion on the hot topic of learning styles — and adds a few himself.*

Summarize the Piece as a Whole

Omit nothing important and strive for overall coherence through appropriate transitions. Write using “summarizing language.” Your reader needs to be reminded that this is not your own work. Use phrases like *the article claims*, *the author suggests*, etc.

- Present the material in a neutral fashion. Your opinions, ideas, and interpretations should be left in your brain — don't put them into your summary. Be conscious of choosing your words. Only include what was in the original work.
- Be concise. This is a summary — it should be much shorter than the original piece. If you're working on an article, give yourself a target length of 1/4 the original article.

Conclude with a Final Statement

This is not a statement of your own point of view, however; it should reflect the significance of the book or article from the author's standpoint.

- Without rewriting the article, summarize what the author wanted to get across. Be careful not to evaluate in the conclusion or insert any of your own assumptions or opinions.

Understanding the Assignment and Getting Started



Figure 2. Many writing assignments will have a specific prompt that sends you first to your textbook, and then to outside resources to gather information.

Often, the handout or other written text explaining the assignment—what professors call the **assignment prompt**—will explain the purpose of the assignment and the required parameters (length, number and type of sources, referencing style, etc.).

Also, don't forget to check the rubric, if there is one, to understand how your writing will be assessed. After analyzing the prompt and the rubric, you should have a better sense of what kind of writing you are expected to produce.

Sometimes, though—especially when you are new to a field—you will encounter the baffling situation in which you comprehend every single sentence in the prompt but still have absolutely no idea how to approach the assignment! In a situation like that, consider the following tips:

1. **Focus on the verbs.** Look for verbs like *compare*, *explain*, *justify*, *reflect*, or the all-purpose *analyze*. You're not just producing a paper as an artifact; you're conveying, in written communication, some intellectual work you have done. So the question is, what kind of thinking are you supposed to do to deepen your learning?
2. **Put the assignment in context.** Many professors think in terms of assignment sequences. For example, a social science professor may ask you to write about a controversial issue three times: first, arguing for one side of the debate; second, arguing for another; and finally, from a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective, incorporating text produced in the first two assignments. A sequence like that is designed to help you think through a complex issue. If the assignment isn't part of a sequence, think about where it falls in the span of the course (early, midterm, or toward the end), and how it relates to readings and other assignments. For example, if you see that a paper comes at the end of a three-week unit on the role of the Internet in organizational behavior, then your professor likely wants you to synthesize that material.

3. **Try a free-write.** A free-write is when you just write, without stopping, for a set period of time. That doesn't sound very "free"; it actually sounds kind of coerced, right? The "free" part is *what* you write—it can be whatever comes to mind. Professional writers use free-writing to get started on a challenging (or distasteful) writing task or to overcome writer's block or a powerful urge to procrastinate. The idea is that if you just make yourself write, you can't help but produce some kind of useful nugget. Thus, even if the first eight sentences of your free write are all variations on "I don't understand this" or "I'd really rather be doing something else," eventually you'll write something like "I guess the main point of this is..." and—booyah!—you're off and running.
4. **Ask for clarification.** Even the most carefully crafted assignments may need some verbal clarification, especially if you're new to a course or field. Professors generally love questions, so don't be afraid to ask. Try to convey to your instructor that you want to learn and you're ready to work, and not just looking for advice on how to get an A.

Defined-Topic Assignments

Many writing tasks will ask you to address a particular topic or a narrow set of topic options. Defined-topic writing assignments are used primarily to identify your familiarity with the subject matter. (Discuss the use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example.)

Remember, even when you're asked to "show how" or "illustrate," you're still being asked to make an argument. You must shape and focus your discussion or analysis so that it supports a **claim** that you discovered and formulated and that all of your discussion and explanation develops and supports.

Undefined-Topic Assignments

Another writing assignment you'll potentially encounter is one in which the topic may be only broadly identified ("water conservation" in an ecology course, for instance, or "the Dust Bowl" in a U.S. History course), or even completely open ("compose an argumentative research essay on a subject of your choice").

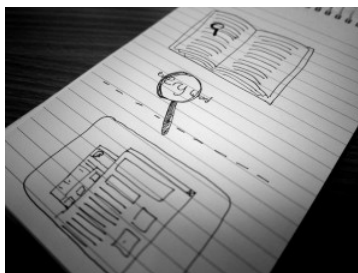


Figure 3. For open-ended assignments, it's best to pick something that interests you personally.

Where defined-topic essays demonstrate your knowledge of the *content*, undefined-topic assignments are used to demonstrate your *skills*—your ability to perform academic research, to synthesize ideas, and to apply the various stages of the writing process.

The first hurdle with this type of task is to find a focus that interests you. Don't just pick something you feel will be "easy to write about" or that you think you already know a lot about—those almost always turn out to be false assumptions. Instead, you'll get the most value out of, and find it easier to work on, a topic that intrigues you personally or a topic about which you have a genuine curiosity.

The same getting-started ideas described for defined-topic assignments will help with these kinds of projects, too. You can also try talking with your instructor or a writing tutor (at your college's writing center) to help brainstorm ideas and make sure you're on track.

?? Getting Started in the Writing Process

Writing is not a linear process, so writing your essay, researching, rewriting, and adjusting are all part of the process. Below are some tips to keep in mind as you approach and manage your assignment.

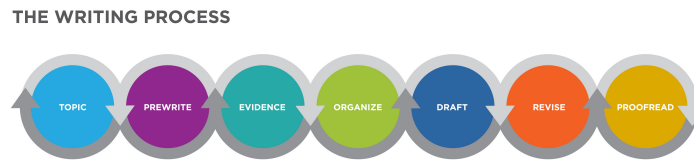


Figure 4. Writing is a recursive process that begins with examining the topic and prewriting.

Brainstorm

Write down topic ideas. If you have been assigned a particular topic or focus, it still might be possible to narrow it down or personalize it to your own interests.

If you have been given an open-ended essay assignment, the topic should be something that allows you to enjoy working with the writing process. Select a topic that you'll want to think about, read about, and write about for several weeks, without getting bored.

Research

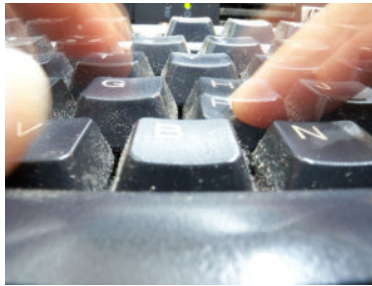


Figure 5. Just getting started is sometimes the most difficult part of writing. Freewriting and planning to write multiple drafts can help you dive in.

If you're writing about a subject you're not an expert on and want to make sure you are presenting the topic or information realistically, look up the information or seek out an expert to ask questions.

- Search for information online. Type your topic into a search engine and sift through the top 10 or 20 results.
 - Note: Be cautious about information you retrieve online, especially if you are writing a research paper or an article that relies on factual information. A quick Google search may turn up unreliable, misleading sources. Be sure you consider the credibility of the sources you consult (we'll talk more about that later in the course). And keep in mind that published books and works found in scholarly journals have to undergo a thorough vetting process before they reach publication and are therefore safer to use as sources.
- Check out a library. Yes, believe it or not, there *is* still information to be found in a library that hasn't made its way to the Web. For an even greater breadth of resources, try a college or university library. Even better, research librarians can often be consulted in person, by phone, or even by email. And they love helping students. Don't be afraid to reach out with questions!

Write a Rough Draft

It doesn't matter how many spelling errors or weak adjectives you have in it. Your draft can be very rough! Jot down those random uncategorized thoughts. Write down anything you think of that you want included in your writing and worry about organizing and polishing everything later.

If You're Having Trouble, Try Freewriting

Set a timer and write continuously until that time is up. Don't worry about what you write, just keeping moving your pencil on the page or typing something (anything!) into the computer.

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