

Understanding Prompts

Identify Elements of Writing Prompts

Prompts often contain 3 features: the goal, length, and style.

1. Goal



You can determine the goal of the assignment by looking for key words. See below for more on key words.

2. Length



The length may be specified by word count, page count, or paragraph count. Some tests may not specify length. You may only need to write what you can in a given time frame.

3. Style



The prompt can also include any elements of style you must address. This might range from the essay being well-structured to a specific format for your document, such as MLA or APA.

Put it all together!

Once you understand the prompt, draft your 1-to-2 sentence main idea or thesis. Rephrase the prompt's goal in your thesis, then include your response with reasoning.

Sample prompt: In a well-structured essay, analyze the barriers to education.

Sample thesis: There are many issues which inhibit education. However, poverty remains the greatest barrier to education because it impacts students' learning in school and at home.

Common Terms in Writing Prompts

As you read a prompt, look for key words that will help you determine the goal of your assignment. Below are common terms, their meanings, and synonyms you may also see.

Analyze: Separate an idea into its individual parts, and then explore those parts and their connections in detail to better understand the whole idea.

Synonyms- Examine, Interpret, Investigate

Compare: Discuss what two or more things share in common.

Synonyms- Relate, Correlate, Juxtapose

Contrast: Discuss the differences between two or more things.

Synonyms- Differentiative, Distinguish, Oppose

Evaluate: Provide an evidence-based opinion on the topic, such as whether you agree or disagree, or the significance of the topic.

Synonyms- Critique, Decide, Judge

Summarize: Write a brief, objective retelling of the most important parts of something. Focus on the main ideas and conclusion(s).

Synonyms- Review, Recap

Synthesize: Use material from different sources to create a new, logically structured piece of writing.

Synonyms- Combine, Incorporate, Integrate